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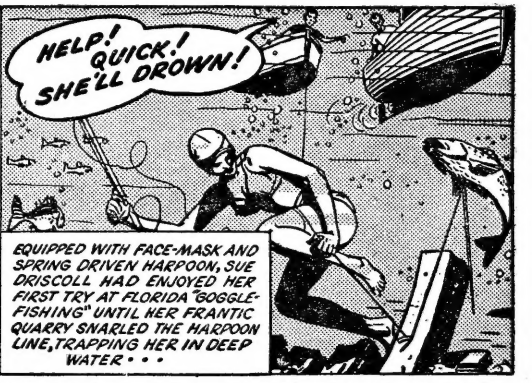

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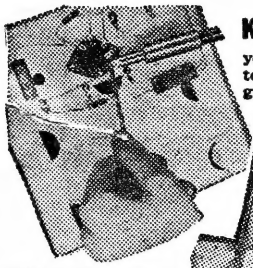

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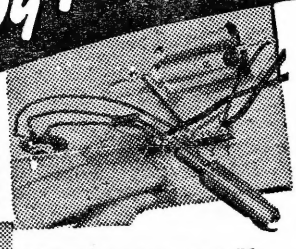

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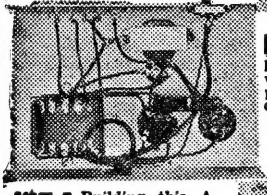

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IN THE SADDLE

THERE exist eerie intangibles in some ancient American ceremonies that make the most hard-headed, realistic white man grow a little cold in the belly. He may watch these age-old Indian rituals performed solemnly in the heat of the Southwestern desert with lifted eyebrow and cynical smile. But his expressions could mask half belief, or doubt . . . or just crawling dread. Harry F. Olmsted, one of *Dime Western's* top-hand writers, who has hardrock knowledge of Indian lore, this month brings *Dime's* readers directly into the dusty, heat-bound native plaza where the awesome Snake Dance of the Hopi is staged.

The holy corn is in the milk and the Hopis have purified the snakes and sent them forth from the pueblos to intercede with the gods for rain to make the crop. Sunday last, the dances were held at the pueblos of Shungopavi and Hotevilla, simultaneously. And did they get results! Since then the skies have frowned and wept and the lightning has flashed and the Thunder Gods have muttered; the dry streams of the Indian country are gnashing at their banks and the mud is deepening.

The third and last of this year's Snake Dance was scheduled . . . and our friend, Joe Sekakuku, who has succeeded the old snake priest at Shipaulovi (deceased), dropped in at the post to give us a personal invitation to be his guests at the ceremony. We left Manuelito after lunch, sped swiftly through Gallup, the Indian capital, and out past Windowrock—site of the Great Hogan, or congressional hall of the Navaho Tribal Council—its beautiful buildings of native stone blending perfectly with the towering cliffs. At almost a mile a minute, over a road tracked by centuries of moccasins, we passed the Franciscan settlement of Saint Michaels and on to Gando where Dr. Salsbury is doing such a magnificent job of combating Indian disease and where the grand old pioneer of traders, Lorenzo Hubbell, rests on his high hill beneath his sandstone shaft.

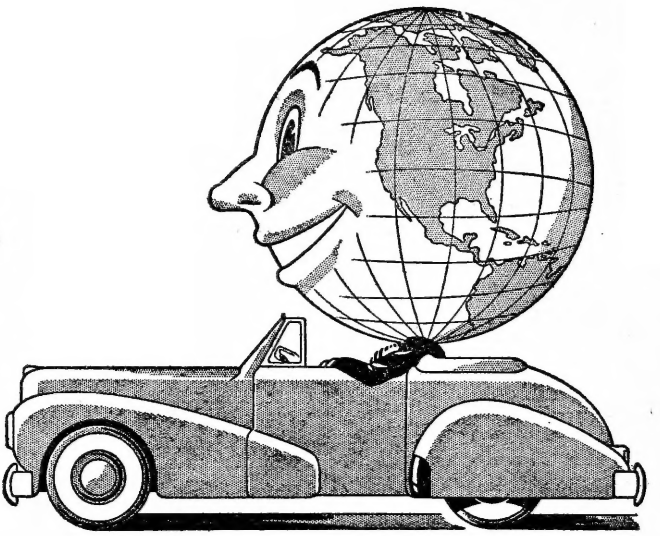
A great fountainhead of storm was gathering over Black Mountain and we eyed it nervously as we sped westward, dropping in and climbing out of the great gash of Steamboat Canyon and on to the Jeddito (Antelope Water) through a curtain of the storm that hammered us vigorously with three-quarter inch hailstones that whitened the land like snow. We paused to give aid and comfort to a tenderfoot stuck in the mud and then into cliff-hemmed Keam's Canyon—named after Tom Keam, adventuresome Cornishman, intrepid frontiersman, deathless friend of the Indians, trader, Indian agent and confrere of Kit Carson, Don Lorenzo Hubbell and Charles Lummis, who lies buried in the parish churchyard in his native Kenwyn.

Now the storm was behind us and, through brilliant sunshine we rolled swiftly toward the bold escarpment of First Mesa, where the ancient pueblos of Walpi and Sichomovi look down from their aeries upon the more modern pueblo of Polacca, with its trading posts and gas stations. The desert stretching limitlessly to the south and west, broken only by tiny green patches of corn where the flood waters could be caught and held. And so to Michongnovi, at the south end of Second Mesa, up a winding, rocky road past unprobed ruins of ancient pueblos of forgotten name, where the dead of countless centuries sleep the long sleep. The desert drops away below us as we climb and distant landmarks—the San Francisco Peaks at Flagstaff in the west, the matchless Lukachukais far to the east—stand out in bold relief.

We round a bend and suddenly before us is the main plaza of newer Shipaulovi, long rows of parked automobiles and throngs of people moving toward the goat track that climbs steeply to the eagle's nest among the crags—Old Shipaulovi. Tourists from a dozen states, looking a little awed by the height, the strange faces and the spell of mystery which cannot be explained. Hopi and Navaho cow-

(Please turn to page 92)

PUTTING THE WORLD ON WHEELS



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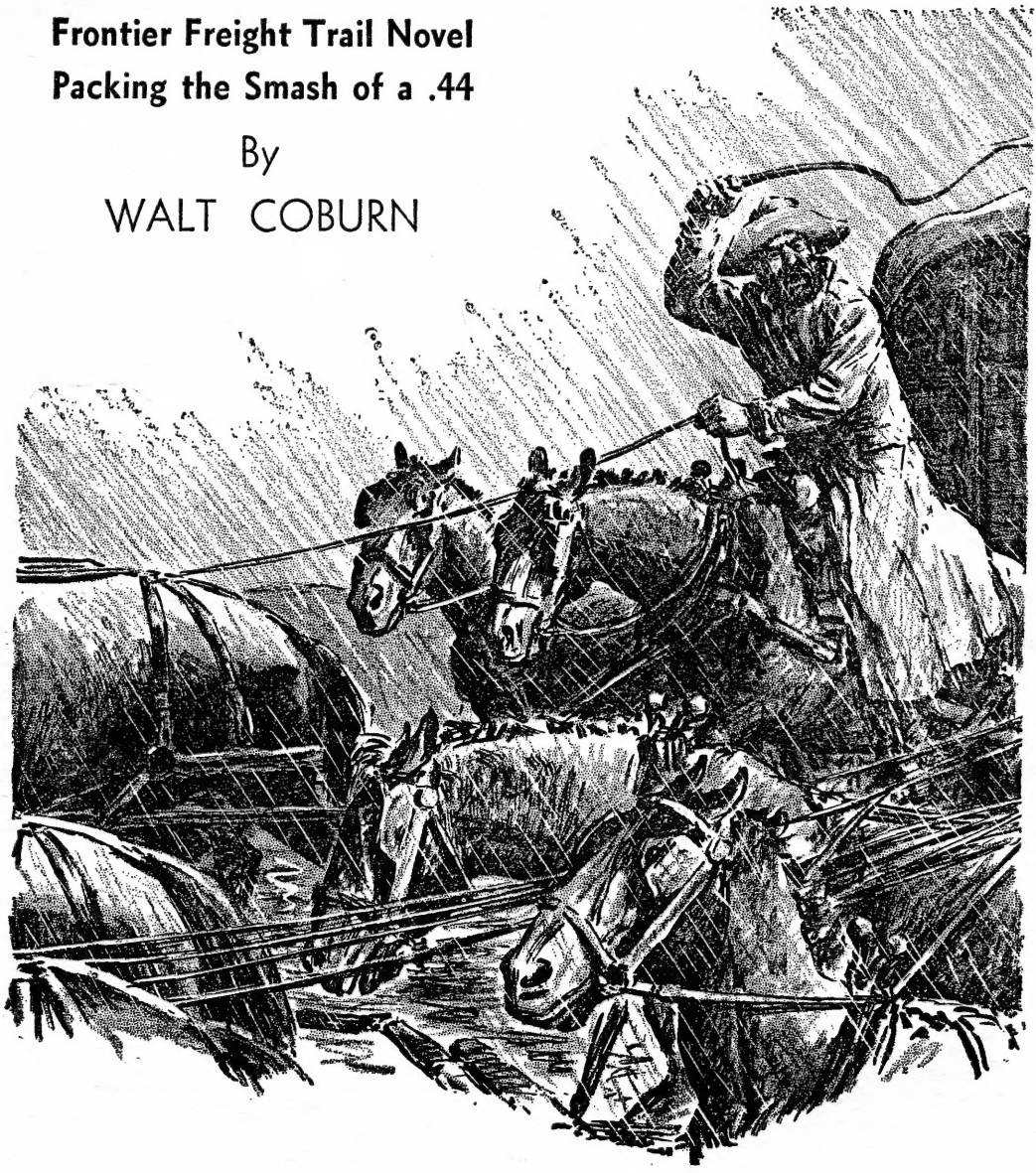

THE TOUGHEST FREIGHTER NORTH OF HELL!

"You stinkin', unwashed, drunken, locoed son!" Horner shouted.

Hardluck Smith, toughest freighter north of Hell, chewed nails and spat tacks and hadn't washed in ten years. Barney Devlin, iron-bellied salooner, pickled his fists in brine, and could kill a man with his hands. And this pair feuded, so it was said, in the Little Rockies, until they joined forces to fight for a cigar box—stuffed with no-rebate tickets straight to a traitor's Valhalla!

CHAPTER ONE

Bog-Down

HARDLUCK SMITH drove his freight outfit into the middle of the five-mile Red Lane and bogged his four loaded freight wagons and the two-wheel canvas-topped caboose down to the hubs. He slacked the jerkline on his twenty-horse team and sat straddle of his saddled nigh-wheeler. The clanking of chain tugs, stretchers and lead bars gave off a dismal metallic sound in the heavy rain. The lane between the barbed wire fences was fifty feet wide. The red clay was banked six feet high for the wagon road. The two day rain had filled the wide ditch on each side of the high road with water. The red gumbo clay that gave the Red Lane its name would bog a saddle blanket.

No freighter in his right mind, drunk or sober, would tackle Red Lane when it was boggy. But some folks said Hardluck Smith wasn't all there. Any white man who let his hair and beard grow, and bragged that he hadn't washed his hands and face or taken a bath in ten years, the Montana cow-country claimed, must have a little touch of the loco weed. But when Smith bragged loud and long that he was the best damned jerkline freighter

this side of hell, nobody gave him an argument. Not only because this big, raw-boned man with the dirty yellow beard, long hair and puckered blue eyes was hard to whip in a ruckus, but because he could recite fabulous feats of jerkline freighting and back them up with the eye-witness proof of his little swamper, Two Dog Moore.

Smith looked like some rain-soaked shaggy Newfoundland. His eyes squinted from under the shapeless brim of his dripping hat. He stared down the long line of his twenty-horse team, on ahead of the muddy red ridge of wagon road and the strips of water that came to the tops of the fence posts. His bearded lips flattened in a grin and he spat a stream of tobacco juice into the red gumbo. His voice, saw-edged and raucous, ripped through the clanking of eased-off chain tugs, slacked lead bars, stretchers and stay chains, as double-trees and single-trees dropped, slack-tugged, into the mud.

"Two Dawg!" Hardluck Smith bellowed at his little swamper who shivered, chilled to the marrow, riding the bull-bar plank that jutted out a few feet from the middle of the lead wagon.

"Two Dawg!" Smith squawled. There was a dismal wail to his voice. "We're a-droppin' trail!"

Moore's old yellow saddle slicker leaked like a sieve. His rusty boots and levis legs were caked with gumbo. The cold rain had shriveled his leathery hide, pinched his face and cramped his wiry muscles. It stiffened his joints and ached in the knotted lumps of mended bones. He reached into the big jockey box and pulled out a brown jug. He got the cork out with his teeth, tilted the jug and let the raw whiskey trickle down his throat. Not until the glow began to warm his innards did Moore lower the jug from his lips. He corked the jug and placed it carefully back in the jockey box with the can of axle grease and hub wrench. His brown eyes watered and there was no way of telling if they were tears of misery or tears caused by the raw booze.

Two Dog Moore made no effort to understand the quirks in Hardluck Smith. The little old swamper had a god to worship, and Hardluck was that unwashed, stinking, profane god of the jerkline. Moore herded sheep when Hardluck laid up his freight outfit during the coldest of the Montana winter months.

He owned two Scotch shepherd dogs that could graze a band of sheep off last night's bedground, herd them all day and fetch them in that evening to bed down, without losing one out of two thousand. Nobody knew where he had acquired the pedigreed pups. Nobody knew where he trained and kept the grown dogs. They were in the canvas-covered caboose now. Dry. Asleep on the tarp-covered bed. Their devotion to little old Two Dog Moore was no more absolute than the swamper's unquestioning belief in Hardluck Smith.

But right now Moore felt sick inside. It was a sickness that made him forget his rain-soaked misery.

"We're a-droppin' trail!"

That had done it! That statement was like a dull, rusty butcher knife twisting in the guts of little old Two Dog Moore.

Because Smith bragged that he never dropped trail. Never uncoupled a wagon between the railroad at Milk River and the seventy-five-mile-end of the freight road in the Little Rockies.

"Hardluck Smith never drops trail!" Two Dog Moore liked to echo the giant freighter's whiskey talk in towns at both ends of the long haul.

It was like some great general breaking his sword across his knee in defeat. . . .

TWO DOG had a secret fear that Smith might someday go plumb loco. This might be it! Moore shivered, and the whiskey soured in his entrails. Something like a sob climbed up into his throat and almost choked him. He swallowed, and his Adam's apple bobbed up and down.

The lead team slacked chain tugs and shook to loosen the strain of their horse collars. The hundred sleighbells that arched over the hames jingled—jingled like Christmas bells. Two Dog Moore cocked his grizzled head sideways to listen to the beloved sound of the sleighbells. Cold rain slid from the brim of his hat and went down between his shoulderblades. But in the gray rain and red gumbo that bogged the horses almost to the hocks, and balled the wheel spokes to the hubs, the precious bells Moore had bought, a few at a time, with his own hard-earned money, sounded with a sort of mockery.

Hardluck Smith was cussing now, cussing Moore for a drunken, sheep-herding, no-good, no-account, plumb worthless and useless hunk of dead freight.

"Rattle your dew claws, you Two Dawg! You gone deef on a man?"

Two Dog's devotion was never tongue-tied. He cussed Hardluck back, fear making his voice shrill. Fear that Hardluck had gone locoed at long last.

"I got every damned wagon couplin' welded!" the little swamper wailed. "I'd ruther set fire to the outfit! I'd ruther you drove it off into the deep water an' drowned your team an' yourself an' me'n my two dogs. I'd ruther see Barney Devlin take your whole outfit on that mortgage he holds! I'd ruther see you in hell with your big back broke, you damned Hardluck Smith. than to see you drop trail! Hellamighty, them other freighters—Big Foot Stur-

man an' his boys, and the Hartman brothers—hellamighty, they'll laugh you plumb outa Montana if you drop trail in the broad middle of the Red Lane! Blow them horses, an' when they tighten up they'll pull this damn li'l ol' load out like pullin' a daub stick outa a can of wagon dope! You—you ain't locoed drunk, Hardluck?" Fear choked the voice in Two Dog Moore's throat.

Smith was bellowing profanity. His eyes were bloodshot. There was a maniacal laugh amid the cursing that came from his bearded lips.

"Take that single-jack an' bust that couplin' you welded on the hind wagon. Then knock the caboose loose. When I haul up a ways we'll snake the caboose around and hook 'er onto the third wagon. I'm droppin' that hind wagon where she's bogged to the runnin' gears. I'm leavin' that load of bob-wire here in the Red Lane till the tires rot off the wagon wheels and let the Hartman boys an' Big Foot an' his overgrowed sons cuss Hardluck Smith into hell when they have to pull out an' haul around that bogged wagonload of bob-wire.

"Locoed? Your damned tootin' ol' Hardluck Smith is locoed! Crazy like a fox! You sheep-brained son! I'm gittin' paid to drop trail! A thousand dollars laid on the barrel head! I'll slap Barney Devlin's face with a fistful of hundred dollar bills an' make him eat that mortgage! Let the Hartman boys an' Big Foot Sturman laugh their heads off! Hardluck Smith will have the last and the biggest laugh. Drop trail, Two Dawg!"

And there, in the middle of the rain-sodden gumbo of the Red Lane, Hardluck Smith, for the first time in his long, colorful, fabulous career as a jerkline freighter, ignominiously dropped trail. Left a loaded wagon behind, bogged to the running gear, the wagon box touching the red gumbo.

CHAPTER TWO

Barney Devlin

TEARS streamed unchecked down Moore's face as he smashed the welded wagon coupling with a hardrock miner's single-jack sledge. He stumbled on down the long line of grainfed freight horses, his blacksnake stroking rather than slapping across the critters' rumps. His voice was a choking sob.

"Tighten up, sons! Tighten up, boys! Tighten them tugs! But don't look back—don't look back to where we dropped trail! Tighten up, sons. . . ."

Rain-soaked, sinking to his knees in the red mud. Sobbing. Chain tugs clanking. Till the lead team tightened their chain tugs and the lead bars lifted and double trees and the attached single trees lifted up out of the sticky red gumbo. And Two Dog Moore winced inside when the sleighbells jangled in the gray rain.

Then Moore signaled and mounted the saddled fat white pony he led and rode along the ten teams of freight horses that worked as one team. Hardluck was astride the nigh-wheeler, handling his jerkline with huge, gnarled, expert hands.

"Tighten Up!" Smith bellowed. "Roulette an' Faro! Stud Hoss and Draw Poker! Nip an' Tuck! Tom an' Jerry! Whiskey an' Sody! Rock an' Rye! Hell an' Damnation! Custer an' Sittin' Bull! Ace an' Deuce! Fire an' Brimstone. Tighten up!"

Sometimes it was Two Dog who rode the nigh-wheel horse and handled the jerkline and Hardluck rode along the string team with the blacksnake.

But in mud like this it needed Smith's genius to turn the wheels of the freight wagons.

They picked up the caboose and hauled it around the bogged wagon and hooked it onto the last wagon. Behind them, in the middle of the Red Lane, was the bogged wagon with its load of barbed wire. It was covered by huge canvas wagon sheets, the sheets lashed down. The ends were puckered tight so that a man had to work hard to pull out an opening in the covered wagon sheet stretched taut over the hardwood hoops to get a look at what was inside.

Red Lane was five miles long. It took Smith and Moore and the twenty-horse team five days to make the five red gumbo miles. The first two days they moved through a gray rain. The rest of the way they had clearer weather but the drying mud was far worse than the gumbo.

Unloading and re-loading. Unhooking and unharnessing at dusk. Wrangling the hobbled horses each morning was the job the two Scotch shepherd dogs saved Two Dog. Digging the harness out of the mud. Horse collars and collar pads in under the wagon tops at night because a wet, ill-fitting collar or wrinkled collar pad rubs hair and hide and a sore-necked horse flinches when the weight hits the collar.

Freighting is a job that calls for plodding patience and skill. It tries the temper of a man, and setbacks, hardships and grief are his lot. and his book of experience is logged with a thousand and one tricks of the freighter trade. The jerkline freighter is a man apart; he belongs solely to his own breed; he is profane and he drinks whiskey like it was crick water and mud is his curse.

The freighter's pride is in his team. He decorates his harness with red, white and blue ivory rings, and puts brass knobs on the hames, and hoops of sleighbells span the

hames on his lead team. His leaders are valuable and beyond ordinary price. The swing teams know their work. If there is a bronc to break he is the off-wheeler. A jerkline from the lead team to the wheeler, where the freighter rides, is like a paint brush in the hand of a skilled artist. Mastery of the jerkline requires long, long practice to perfect some natural ability that jerkline freighters claim must be born in a man.

Long before the outfit pulled up the hill out of the far end of the five-mile stretch of gumbo, and pulled to a chain-clanking, sleighbell jingling halt at the Half Way House that was a stage station, the news had spread across that part of Montana that Hardluck Smith had dropped trail in the middle of Red Lane.

The stage driver had had to pull around the bogged wagon and had almost turned over into the deep water on the slippery slant. He had used six horses hooked to the lightest stagecoach in the rolling stock belonging to Barney Devlin. And the driver had cursed the name of Hardluck Smith from the Little Rockies to Milk River each trip he made through the Red Lane and around the bogged wagon.

Rule Horner, the driver, had to swing around Hardluck's long outfit each day Smith was fighting his way inch by inch through Red Lane. Because the freight outfit had the right-of-way. It was sheer luck that kept the stagecoach from sliding into the muddy water each time it tooled past the plodding jerkline freight outfit.

"You stinkin', unwashed, drunken, locoed son!" Horner shouted. "You thick-skulled mule-brained, likker-soaked, jerkline son!"

And Hardluck spat tobacco juice in the mud and bellowed back a long string of insults. While Two Dog Moore added his two-bits worth.

BARNEY DEVLIN was at Half Way House when Hardluck pulled up. Devlin was short, paunchy, whiskey-veined and husky as a dwarfed Durham bull. He had wiry red hair and eyes hard as glass. He was a two-fisted fighter, a quart-a-day-man who never got too drunk to turn a cunning business deal. Devlin had been a meal ticket prize fighter, a hard-rock miner, a good mixer among men, and popular with the ladies.

He opened a saloon with a keg of whiskey and a tent. He grubstaked prospectors. A couple of them struck gold in the Little Rockies and Devlin was cut in on fifty per cent. Now he owned two gold mines, three saloons and a dance hall up the gulch. He got hold of the stage, mail and express contracts. Devlin was a man to be reckoned with. He wore red neckties and fancy vests and a heavy watch chain of placer nuggets and a gold ring with the biggest sapphire ever mined in Montana. He smoked expensive cigars.

He owned the fastest trotting teams in that part of the country. When the mill cleaned up each month, Devlin took the gold bullion from the Little Rockies to the railroad at Milk River. Or he took the decoy pig iron bricks in leather cases. And his bodyguard, Timberline, took the bullion in another rig. Or else Devlin and his quick-triggered Jim Timberline went together in open challenge to any road-agents.

Barney Devlin seldom drove along the road in daytime. He liked to travel after dark, on business or for pleasure, with a bottle of whiskey, a box of cigars and a double barreled sawed-off shotgun on the buggy seat beside him. It was bad luck for any man to stop Devlin along the road. . . .

The feud between Devlin and Smith was of long standing. It dated back to the discovery of the Bear Gulch Mine. Hardluck and Two Dog had staked out a mining claim. For some reason they had neglected to keep up their assessment work on the claim. And when they did get around to it, they found their stakes and notice pulled up. It had been restaked by Barney Devlin; Timberline was standing shotgun guard there. Timberline, tall, lanky, black-eyed, with the coarse, straight black hair of an Injun, had ordered Hardluck and Two Dog off the claim. And he'd backed it up with buckshot.

The ore samples from Bear Gulch Mine had assayed rich. Barney Devlin had himself a gold mine.

"I'd cut you an' Two Dog a half in'trest," Barney Devlin spread his brogue as thick as molasses, there in his saloon, his eyes green as bottle glass as he watched Hardluck, "only the pair av ye'd drink yerselves to death on yer proceeds. And then who the hell'd do my freightin'?"

Devlin had a hearty laugh that never reached his hard green eyes. Timberline stood behind him, his hand on his gun.

Hardluck hadn't bothered to fight it out. He knew when he was licked. He told Devlin he'd have the harness maker whittle Barney a leather medal. With "Big Hearted Barney" carved on it. Hardluck and Moore went on freighting.

There wasn't much money in hauling freight, but it was a living. That's the best you could say for it. A damned hard way to make a dollar, if you couldn't stand grief. And there wasn't a day or night that Hardluck Smith did not swear he'd quit freighting. Once he got out of the hole. But he was forever in debt. If it wasn't one thing it was another. Always paying for a dead horse, he told Two Dog.

Devlin was banker for the Little Rockies.

The big old safe in his log cabin at Landusky held the I.O.U.'s of every man in that part of the Montana cow country. Some of those promissory notes had been pigeon-holed for years. Devlin had a habit of giving a man a chance to beat his debt.

"Double or nothin,'" Barney would tell a gent who showed up with the cash to take up his I.O.U. "Flip a dollar. Cut high card. Match a horserace. Rassle or fight you for it. Name your game. Double or nothin'."

Devlin was lucky. And a little crooked, unless you watched him. He could take your dollar and flip it till it hit the ridgelog of his saloon. And the dollar would be heads or tails, whichever he wanted. He would let you break the seal on a brand new deck of cards and you could riffle and shuffle 'em. And nine times out of ten Barney Devlin would cut the high card.

Match a horserace with Devlin and you had something on your hands. Barney would put an Injun kid bareback on a quarter-horse he had, and beat the living hell out of your race horse. Or he'd match his team of Hambletonian trotters over any distance between the Little Rockies and Milk River. Anything from one mile to seventy-five miles. Barney Devlin was a horseman. Born with it in his Irish blood, he said.

Devlin would wrestle any man, regardless of size or weight. No holds barred. And the first fall declared the winner. Barney knew some fast, tricky, dirty holds. He could break a bigger man's arm or leg or his neck. He'd learned some kind of jujitsu wrestling from a Jap on San Francisco's Barbary Coast.

Same way with fighting. He'd picked up a little prize ring science and added the dirty fighting he'd learned on the Coast and he quoted the champion who said the bigger they were the harder they fell. And Barney Devlin still pickled his fighting hands in strong salt brine.

Whiskey and cigar smoking did not seem to hurt his wind. What paunch he carried was solid and hard and he was fast as a lightweight and quick as lightning. His red hair was sprinkled with gray but Barney Devlin was ageless.

CHAPTER THREE

Freight Trail Samaritan

BARNEY DEVLIN'S stocky body filled the doorway of his log cabin saloon at Half Way House. He watched the freight outfit pull off the road. He stood smoking while Hardluck and Two Dog unharnessed and slid grain-filled nosebags on their horses. When the animals had finished Hardluck would take off the nosebags and turn them loose. He hobbled the horses apt to pull out. Two Dog would send his dogs to wrangle the horses in the morning.

Moore was getting supper. Smoke came from the stovepipe that stuck out of the canvas-covered caboose where they ate and slept. Hardluck tended his horses. Neither the freighter nor his swamper had let on they'd seen Devlin in the doorway. Nor did they pay attention to Jim Timberline when the gun-slinger came out of the big log barn where the stagecoach teams were stabled along with Barney's trotting team and Timberline's saddle horse.

Timberline wore a bone handled six-shooter in a tied-down holster. He carried a sawed-off shotgun in the crook of his arm. His drooping black mustache hid the corners of his thin-lipped, cruel mouth. Timberline walked with a short, stiff-legged gait, his long back straight, as if he had a ramrod shoved down his spine.

There was an eating house at Half Way House stage station. The stock-tender's squaw did the cooking, and there was plenty of food on the big heavy platters. Other freighters liked to eat there. Get away from their own grub. But the squaw wouldn't let Hardluck sit down at her clean table till he washed the dirt off his hands and bearded face and got the stink out of his sweat-caked clothes. Which tickled Hardluck, who claimed he'd tried to get cleaned up about six years ago when a good looking schoolmarm had showed up in the Little Rockies. He'd gone down to the blacksmith shop. And there he had ruined two horse rasps trying to scrape the crust off his hands before the blacksmith had run him off. That, said he, had discouraged him from further attempts at getting duded up.

Devlin waited until Timberline had entered the saloon by the back door. Then he hailed the freighter.

"What you got for me, Hardluck?"

"Two barrels of whiskey and a wagon load of keg beer." Hardluck shouted back across the hundred yards of open ground between the wagon road and log buildings of the Half Way House.

"Good likker?" Devlin put a chuckle in it.

"It'll do."

Hardluck and Two Dog could tap a whiskey barrel and never leave a sign to show where they'd drawn off a gallon, or two, or five. They used a cold chisel, its edge carefully blunted. They would go to work like a pair of barrel-hoopers, tapping down one of the metal hoops, using a strip of canvas to keep the cold chisel from marking the hoop. When the hoop was slipped down an inch or so, a gimlet bored the small hole and a tube was inserted and the whiskey siphoned off into

the jug. If an airhole was needed it was gimleted in where the whiskey distiller's name was branded into the barrel head. When the whiskey was siphoned off, the gimlet holes were plugged with wooden pegs and the pegs driven flush with the barrel wood and charred to match the wood. The hoop carefully tapped back into place. The loss of the whiskey was marked off as shrinkage on the saloon keeper's book. This shrinkage was considered legitimate enough unless the freighter allowed himself to get caught at it. Then it was up to him and the saloon man to settle it, according to their lights. But, barring a lot of rough joshing, nothing had ever been done about it.

"That all you got for me, Hardluck?"

"That's all."

"No cigars?"

Oh, hell! Yeah! Them damned seegars. Free freight. Too light to weigh a pound. Why don't Horner haul them seegars on his stagecoach? This idee of sendin' a dozen boxes of seegars by a freight outfit is shore silly and a damn' nuisance!"

"I explained it more'n once," said Devlin. "It 'climates the tobacco. Like an ocean trip ages likker in the barrel. But if you've let 'em get wet in that rain—"

"Them seegars is wrapped in a canvas bean sack. That what I say—damned bothersome! They're in the jockey box of one of the wagons. You want 'em now?"

"I got enough with me. Haul 'em on to Landusky."

HARDLUCK cussed Barney Devlin and his cigars. Every trip Hardluck Smith made from Milk River to the Little Rockies, he fetched a package of half a dozen boxes of the special brand of cigars Devlin smoked. The cigars were shipped from Helena by express, and Hardluck picked the package up at the express office at the Malta depot. He'd shove the package in its heavy brown paper wrapping with its wholesale cigar company label, into the jockey box of one of his freight wagons. Along with the can of axle grease and hub wrench. And to protect the cigars from the weather he'd tie it in a heavy canvas bean sack.

It was bulky, and Hardluck had to take out his can of axle grease and the big hub wrench, and that small inconvenience annoyed the freighter far more than it should. Not that it actually mattered a damn, because he greased his wagons before they were loaded, and he'd have no need for the axle grease or hub wrench. But every time he had to take them out of their jockey box and into the jockey box of another wagon, to make room for the bulky package of cigars, Hardluck Smith would curse Devlin for a bothersome shanty Irish string of fighting names.

"He just does it a-purpose, Two Dawg," Hardluck would wail dismally, "to bother a man. Just because he's got a thousand dollar plaster on my outfit. Damn his mean Irish heart!"

Two Dog Moore always felt disloyal to Hardluck Smith because he could not find real hatred in his heart for Barney Devlin. Two Dog Moore could not hate Barney. Even when Devlin had jumped their mining claim and put Timberline there to run Hardluck and him off.

It dated back ten years, to the time when Moore was herding sheep. He'd come to town to go on a Christmas drunk. He wasn't called Two Dog Moore then. Just Moore—and he'd fetched his dog along to town. And somebody had killed his dog, while the little sheepherder was sleeping off his jag. Some drunken cowpuncher, shooting up the town, had either purposely or by accident shot the animal. The dog had crawled into the empty stall at the barn where Moore had spread his tarp-covered blankets and bedded down with a jug. Moore had the dead dog cradled in his arms when he woke up from his whiskey stupor.

The sheepherder had taken it almighty hard. The cow town and mining camp of Landusky, celebrating its Christmas, was callous about a sheepherder's grief over a dead dog.

Horner had fetched a crate, on his stagecoach. Barney Devlin carried it into the back room of his Bucket of Blood Saloon. And he'd taken Moore in there and opened the crate. And had given the sheepherder two roly-poly shaggy pups. Pedigreed Scotch shepherd pups. Ordered by wire and expressed and fetched out by stagecoach. Furry black with white markings.

The saloon man had left the little sheepherder sitting on the floor with the two fat, furry pups licking the tears that coursed down his whiskered cheeks.

"Tell nobody where them pups come from," Devlin told the little sheepherder. "It'd hurt my cowpuncher trade."

Moore had raised the pups and in so doing had acquired the name Two Dog. He felt disloyal as hell to his tin god of the jerkline, Hardluck Smith, because he could not hate Barney Devlin.

By something of the same token, Hardluck Smith held out on Two Dog Moore. Hardluck cursed Devlin to his face and behind his back. He bellowed his hatred for that claim-jumping shanty Irish son. But if ever that tough, red-headed devil had doubled a brine-pickled fist and hit him, Hardluck would have taken the blow without fighting back. And the Little Rockies would have called Smith a rank coward and they would have been wrong.

NOBODY knew about it. That incident, too, had happened about ten years before. The hard winter. Snow drifted, and piled high and crusted. Impossible to haul a pound of freight across that seventy-five-mile stretch of open prairie between the Little Rockies and Milk River. Twenty head of horses gaunt and slowly starving to death and the last of the hay in the feedrack at Hardluck Smith's place below town. Hardluck had taken his old hogleg six-shooter and a box of cartridges from his warsack. It was spitting hard snow as brittle as frozen white sand and Hardluck was half way between his cabin and the feedrack where his starving horses were humped, rumps to the raw wind, his loaded gun in his hand, when he witnessed a miracle.

A hayrack piled high, on bobsled runners. Pulled by a six-horse team. Six pedigreed Hambletonian trotters that had never hauled anything heavier than one of Barney Devlin's light rigs. And Devlin was handling the six lines—Devlin in a plucked beaver overcoat and fur cap and gauntlet mittens to match.

"Grab a pitchfork, you big stinkin' jerkliner!" Barney Devlin's voice roared from a frost-bitten face. "There's more hay where this come from."

Smith had never learned how to thank a man properly for something like that. He choked up when he tried and the tears that squeezed from his squinted blue eyes froze in his dirty yellow beard. So he had never thanked Devlin. And the inarticulate thanks stayed locked inside him to be buried with him when he died. Barney Devlin had exacted a solemn promise of silence from Hardluck Smith.

"I'd die av shame if it was found out I'd disgraced the three fastest trottin' teams ever come to Montana, hookin' 'em in work harness," said Devlin. "Breath a word av it, drunk or sober, and I'll beat ye to death wit' these same dukes that's floored the toughest men on the old Barbary Coast. One word out av ye, ye dirty stinkin' scut, and I'll beat the brains loose inside your skull. Mind, now!"

Hay was a hundred dollars a ton at the railroad, and there was no way of hauling it across the drifted, blizzard-bound cow country. But Devlin would not take a dollar from Smith.

"Ye kin fetch me a box av cigars when the Chinook wind melts the drifts."

And those were the cigars Hardluck Smith hauled from Milk River to the Little Rockies every trip he'd made since then. The cigars paid for. Devlin would show Hardluck the bill each time. The bill sent by the wholesaler at Helena. And he'd deduct the amount of the cigars from what he owed Hardluck Smith for hauling beer and whiskey to his Little Rockies saloons and gambling dives.

A strange character, Barney Devlin. How many men he held in debt, no one knew. Men cursed him behind his back for a rascal and a blackguard. Now and then somebody would get knocked down, and the boots put to him, because he had carried his cursing too far, and some man in debt to Devlin had taken it up. So Barney had friends among his many enemies.

The supper bell took Devlin and Timberline to supper. After supper Smith and Moore walked over to the saloon, the sheepdogs trailing at Two Dog's heels. Hardluck and his swamper wore clothes and boots soiled by the red gumbo of Red Lane. Sparks glinted in Hardluck's eyes when he counted out ten one hundred dollar bills and laid the money on the pineboard bar.

"Count it twice, Barney," said Smith. "Then lemme watch you tear up that I.O.U. of mine."

Timberline's beady wicked black eyes watched suspiciously. "You musta robbed a bank, Hardluck," Timberline said.

There was a mirthless grin on Devlin's whiskey-veined face as his eyes probed the freighter.

"It ain't fer the likes av me, Hardluck," Devlin chuckled, "to ask where you come by this much foldin' money."

"No," Hardluck grinned, "it ain't."

Devlin put the money in his wallet. He said the I.O.U. was locked up in his safe at Landusky. That he'd destroy it when he got home. The four of them had a drink together. It was good whiskey, from Barney's private bottle.

"Enjoy it, Hardluck," Devlin said, lifting his filled shot glass high. "It's the most costly booze either av us ever throwed lip over."

"Uh?" Hardluck grunted.

"I've had a standin' bet with the Hartman boys and Bigfoot Sturman. A thousand dollars—that Hardluck Smith would never drop trail."

The glass in the big dirt-crusted hand of the freighter slopped whiskey on the pineboard bar.

"Moreover," Devlin went on, "it busts my freight contract with you. I told the Hartman boys and Bigfoot Sturman I'd take my freightin' away from you and split the haulin' between their freight outfits if ever you dropped trail."

CHAPTER FOUR

Wanted—One Payroll!

DEVLIN'S eyes were hard as he lifted his drink. Smith downed his at a gulp and smashed the empty glass against the log wall.

Two Dog Moore followed suit. The look in Hardluck's eyes killed the grin on Devlin's face. Moore squatted on his mud-caked hunkers with his arms around the two shaggy sheepdogs.

Only Timberline was enjoying it. His mouth twisted under the drooping mustache. "When you haulin' that bogged wagon you dropped," Timberline's voice was flat-toned, "outa the Red Lane?"

Hardluck snarled at the lanky gun-slinger. "Till the wheels rot there," said Smith, "there she stays, by the great eternal hell, in the broad middle of the Red Lane. She's my wagon, and accordin' to law she can't be moved an inch till I hook onto 'er an' haul 'er out. Let ary man touch that bogged wagon or the bob-wire she's loaded with, and I'll make 'em wish they'd bin born dead. That goes as she lays!" His huge fist, scabbed and crusted and caked with the gumbo clay mud of the Red Lane, banged with a resounding crash on the pineboard bar.

"Amen to that," said Devlin. "If that's the way you want it, Hardluck. Let that wagon stay bogged till it rots. A monument to Hardluck Smith, the jerkline freighter who never dropped trail!"

Something like a sob came from where Moore had his head buried in the shaggy speckled black coats of the two Scotch sheepdogs.

And they felt the uneasy silence that followed the last echo of Hardluck's bellow shutting them in, there in the light of the big swinging lamp. And they stiffened rigidly when a harsh, flat-toned voice out in the night challenged them.

"Keep your hands empty, gents!" barked the voice from the darkness. "And lift 'em high. We're playin' for keeps. It's a holdup, Devlin."

"Don't shoot my dogs!" Moore hugged the shaggy animals closer to him as he squatted on the floor.

"Timberline," said the voice outside in the night, "is the dog I'd like to gut shoot. I hope you gimme a reason to pull this trigger, Timberline. Where is it, Barney? Let's save time."

"You're a week early," Devlin grinned widely. "We don't clean up at the mill till the first av the month. Ketch us then and we'll hand you them gold bricks you're after."

"To hell with the bullion, Devlin. Them gold bricks is too heavy to handle and too hard to git shut of. It's foldin' money we want. Your big Bear Gulch Mine payroll. We need a South America stake. Them Bohunks and Cousin Jack hardrock muckstick swingers kin wait for their pay till you git another payroll. Kick through, Devlin. Or we'll gut-shoot Timberline there in his boot tracks. If Timberline ain't worth that much to you, say so. And we'll let 'im have it. Then we'll go to work on you till you hand over the payroll. You're tough, Barney, but not so tough that .45 bullets glance off your hide. Kick through! Let's save us all some time and bother. Where's that Bear Gulch payroll?"

There was no way of telling how many men were outside. Hardluck stepped back out of line between the open front door and where Barney Devlin stood with his hands in the air. Timberline, behind the bar, stood with both hands lifted and his black eyes staring at the open doorway.

"You take them sheep hounds of yourn, Two Dawg," Hardluck chuckled like he was enjoying the situation, "an' git over here in the corner an' out from underfoot, before you git tromped to death when that fearless Timberline thing stompedes. I'll fetch a bottle just in case we run dry." Hardluck reached out a long arm and snaked the bar bottle off the end of the pine board bar. Then he nudged Two Dog Moore towards the corner.

Hardluck had not bothered to lift his hands. He never packed a gun and he and Two Dog stayed out of any ruckus that did not directly concern them. The big, yellow-bearded freighter made it plain that this hold-up was none of their business.

Devlin leaned his back against the bar and scowled through the open door. Under ragged brows his eyes were hard and green and glittering like the green eyes of a dangerous animal.

"Quit stallin', Barney," rasped the voice outside. "You wanta git Timberline killed?"

"Timberline," Barney Devlin's voice was cold, "gits well paid to take that risk."

"You mean—"

"Timberline," said Devlin, "ain't worth a plugged dollar to me, beyond what wages I pay him."

The way he said it, the look on his red, whiskey-veined, pug-ugly face, the glint of his hard green eyes, backed up the brutal statement for exactly what it was worth.

Behind the bar, Timberline's face grayed in the lamplight. His black eyes glittered. He was breathing fast and cold sweat broke out on his lean face.

THERE was a long moment of silence. Without a trace of fear Barney leaned back against the bar, his clenched fists lifted to the level of his burly shoulders, a mirthless grin on his face.

"You won't kill the goose," Barney Devlin said, "that's layin' the gold brick eggs. But I ain't got a gold brick on me. And the Bear Gulch Mine payroll is somewhere on its way to the Little Rockies. I ain't packin' it.

If ever you ketch me with my gold bricks or the payroll, I'll gamble you for it, double or nothin' and you name your game. Tonight you're just wastin' your talents."

Over against the far wall, Smith lifted his bottle of bar whiskey. He gulped down a drink. Then the bottle swished through the air. Swiftly, without warning, unerring in its aim. The partly filled bottle struck the hanging lamp above the bar and there was the loud crash of smashed glass and the smell of spilled kerosene and whiskey and the saloon was plunged into darkness.

Outside in the night there was the rasping sound of a man cursing. Then the pounding of shod hoofs.

"Get out there, Timberline." Devlin's voice had a flat, ugly sound in the darkness. "Earn your wages."

The two Scotch shepherds were whimpering nervously, making growling noises. Two Dog Moore's voice crooning. Hardluck's big, rawboned frame crouched there, protecting his little swamper and the dogs.

Timberline made a lot of heavy noise as he came around the end of the bar with his six-shooter and sawed-off shotgun. His silhouette filled the doorway and then was gone in the night. The double-barreled shotgun blasted the silence.

A match flared in Devlin's hands as he lit a fresh cigar. The match flare showed the lopsided grin on his beefy face and the glitter of his green eyes.

"That lampwick," Barney Devlin talked around the big expensive cigar that jutted, its end glowing, from a corner of his wide mouth, "needed trimmin'."

There was a lantern hanging from a wooden peg in the log wall. Hardluck lit it and carried the lighted lantern to the pine board bar and set it down.

"In case you got the guts," Hardluck grinned at Devlin, "to charge me with that bottle I busted, it was about half empty. Rotgut Injun likker, at that."

He grinned at Devlin's clothes that were spattered with the spilled kerosene and whiskey and tiny bits of shattered glass.

Outside, Timberline was prowling around noisily. Devlin and the freighter passed strange looks. Then Devlin took the ten one hundred dollar bills from his wallet and shoved them into Hardluck's big, mud-caked hand.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sign of the Grasshopper Men

THERE was an unwritten law that protected any freight wagon left behind along the road. Its load must not be bothered. Nothing must be stolen from the wagon. There were, of course, certain exceptions. If the load had beer or whiskey, and some cowpuncher was thirsty, he helped himself. And when he met the freighter along the road, or in town, he told him about it and paid him or the freighter waved it aside. Or if there was grub on the load, and a man was hungry, he took what he needed and settled later with the freighter.

But to steal from an abandoned freight wagon was a low-down crime that got punished if and when the thief was found. And the punshment was as public and humiliating as it was brutally painful.

The wagon bogged to the running gear in the dried gumbo of the Red Lane was loaded to the limit with spools of barbed wire. The stagecoach had rutted the detour around the wagon, and other rigs of all kinds followed the ruts, and the freight wagons of the Hartman brothers and Bigfoot Sturman and his stalwart sons made the ruts deeper. And the wagon stayed there, cemented in by the dried red gumbo clay, its load untouched.

Nobody knew who owned the barbed wire. It was days before the wire aroused any curiosity or caused any comment. And Hardluck gave out nothing in the way of information. The attempted hold-up of Barney Devlin at Half Way House caused its ripple of range talk and it lasted only a short time. Such attempts had been made before and without any more lucrative success. Neither Devlin nor Timberline had ever been caught with the gold bullion or the Bear Gulch Mine payroll.

"Ketch me with it," Barney Devlin's challenge stood, "and I'll gamble the road agent for it. Double or nothin'. He kin name his game."

Timberline had found no trace of the hold-up man or men. There had been a hard, ugly glint in his black eyes when he reported his failure to Devlin.

"Whoever it was, Barney," he said, "got plumb away in the night."

Barney had showed no concern over it, one way or another. Hardluck and Two Dog were there. Hardluck's grin had been taunting. Hardluck had given the thousand dollars back to Barney Devlin, to put in his safe. Two Dog, he said, might draw on it from time to time when he got his eye on some sleighbells or ivory rings for the harness.

Timberline got drunk enough finally that night to get it out of his craw.

"You didn't mean what you told that hold-up gent, Barney—that I ain't worth a plugged dollar to you, outside my wages. You never meant a cold-blooded thing like that, Barney."

Devlin's hard green eyes had fixed the lanky, quick-triggered Timberline with a merciless stare.

"I meant just that, Timberline," Barney

Devlin said quietly. "I sure meant just that."

Timberline had backed away, a scared look in his eyes. The gun-slinger had stepped back from the pine board bar like he was afraid of something. He had muttered something about looking after the horses and had backed out the saloon door, leaving it open. Barney's stare followed Timberline out into the night.

Then Barney Devlin had laughed, a short, ugly laugh. It sent a cold shiver along Hardluck Smith's backbone.

Devlin fed Smith and Moore whiskey from his private stock. All three got drunk, each in his own way. And when Two Dog had bedded down in the corner with his two shaggy sheepdogs, Hardluck downed drink for drink with Devlin, each man trying to drink the other down.

Smith got roaring drunk. He bragged that he'd never dropped trail. And the louder the big, bearded freighter bellowed, the more silent Devlin became, and the greener his eyes got.

Cigar butts floated soggily on the floor in the brown lake of Hardluck Smith's tobacco spittle. And a crimson dawn streaked the sky when Hardluck Smith finally caved in.

"All right, you shanty Irish son! You claim-jumpin' robber! You win! Gimme them ten hundred dollar bills!"

Barney again took the ten one hundred dollar bills from his wallet and laid them on the bar, counting them out one by one.

Smith picked up the bills, twisted them, poured whiskey on the twist and then deliberately took a match from his pocket and set fire to it. Holding the blazing money in his hand till it burned to a gray ash and the dying flame of the last burnt paper money singed the calloused ends of thumb and forefinger.

"That was dirty money, Barney. Paid me by a white collared dude at Milk River. He paid me to haul his bob-wire. Paid me a thousand dollars to drop that wagonload of bob-wire at Half Way House. Where it will come in handy in a few weeks when he fetches out a hell-slue of dry land farmers to homestead on all this land you got fenced off both sides of the Red Lane. You got time now to beat 'em to what land you want. Pick a dozen men you kin trust. Homestead them men where they'll do you the most damned good. Locate 'em on your best water an' hay meadow land. Damn your red shanty Irish hide to hell, wake up Two Dog. Ask him if ol' Hardluck Smith had to drop trail in the Red Lane. I coulda unhooked half my string team an' gone to sleep an' Two Dog with me in the caboose and Two Dog Moore's sheep dawgs woulda handled the team and pulled the Red Lane without droppin' trail. I dropped trail in the broad middle of your Red Lane a-purpose. This checks the bet to you, you red-muzzled, shanty Irish Barney Devlin son!"

Devlin had grinned a lopsided grin around the soggy butt of his cigar. "Some day, Hardluck," he said quietly, "ye'll have me shakin' that dirt-scabbed hand of yours."

They finished the bottle. Then Hardluck picked Two Dog up in his arms and carried the sleeping swamper to his bunk in the caboose. The two shaggy dogs bedded down with their master and left no more room, so Hardluck closed the caboose door and stretched out full length on the floor in his clothes and hat and boots.

Barney Devlin took a sealed bottle and went to bed in his room at the Half Way House.

While over at the stage barn Timberline crouched in the hayloft with a jug and his sawed-off shotgun and drank to warm the chill that crawled like a cold and slimy snake through his long guts.

BARNEY DEVLIN had hooked his trotting team to his light top buggy and pulled out, and Timberline rode horseback alongside the rig, and they were long gone when Hardluck Smith and Two Dog Moore pulled out after a day's layover at Half Way House.

"Don't take no wooden nickles," Hardluck called to the squawman stock-tender.

The stock-tender's name was Oscar Frye and he was tough enough to handle the toughest customers who stopped to get drunk and play poker at Half Way House. Frye made twice what Devlin paid him by running a way station for horse thieves and renegades on the prowl. If Barney knew it, he'd never let on. And Frye was the best stock-tender in the country. Exacting as the stage-driver Rule Horner was, he had nothing but praise for Frye as a stock-tender. But as a man, Rule Horner had another opinion, but he kept that to himself, because his business was driving a stagecoach.

Oscar Frye looked at Smith with a hard, jaundiced eye. Oscar Frye was tow-headed and burly and packed a gun even when he sat down at his squaw's supper table.

"Haul your damned stink down the road, Hardluck, you're wastin' my time. . . ."

"Wastin' time . . . . Savin' time. . . ." Oscar Frye used the expression a lot. Too many times. Hardluck grinned and spat tobacco juice at the ground. Frye should have watched it the other night when he stood outside the lighted saloon and told Devlin it was a hold-up. . .

"Tighten up!" Hardluck Smith roared. And bellowed the names of his string team. Chain tugs rattled and lead bars clanked and the sleighbells tinkled as the lead team tightened their tugs. Two Dog rode down the line and

his shaggy dogs trotted at the heels of his fat white wrangling pony. He tied the pony alongside the swing team and eased himself up on the bull board and reached for his jug. The dogs trotted along in under the caboose.

It wasn't until Hardluck Smith's freight outfit pulled to a halt in front of the Bucket of Blood Saloon and they unloaded and Barney Devlin came from his log cabin that Hardluck remembered he had forgot something but he couldn't recollect just what it was he'd overlooked.

"I'm about outa cigars, Hardluck." Barney, dressed to the nines and wearing a new red silk necktie, halted alongside the freight wagons.

Then Hardluck remembered. And he cussed and spat tobacco juice. "Them damned seegars! You'll have to git a caddy of Bull Durham an' learn to roll your own, you red-muzzled Irish son. Your seegars is in the jockey box of that wagon loaded with bob-wire that I bogged down in Red Lane. . . ."

The color faded from Devlin's face and left his freshly barbered skin mottled. His green eyes narrowed. The fists he pickled in salt brine clenched. Then unclenched slowly as the florid color came back into his face and he grinned.

"It's a horse on me, Hardluck."

Devlin stood there while Hardluck and Two Dog, with the assistance of hardrock miners who had the promise of beer, unloaded the barrels of whiskey and kegs of beer.

While across the street, at Dutch John's Saloon, the Hartman brothers and Bigfoot Sturman and his stalwart sons stood on the wide plank sidewalk and swapped good-natured profane insults with Smith and Moore. Mostly concerning Hardluck dropping trail in Red Lane.

Hardluck always pulled out for his little ranch beyond town when he had unloaded his freight. To turn his horses loose in the pasture before he and Two Dog collected their freight money and proceeded to get drunk.

And always, on the way out of town, he pulled one of his spectacular jerkline stunts like turning his twenty horse team and string of coupled wagons around in the street. And while the town cheered and his rival freighters shouted ribald insults and Hardluck returned the insults in kind and waved his hat to the ladies, and Two Dog Moore's eyes misted with vast pride and the shaggy dogs barked with excitement, Hardluck turned his jerkline freight outfit on a dime and gave a nickle change to Bigfoot and the Hartman boys. Then Hardluck's outfit went down the street to the clinging jangle of chain harness and creaky brake shoes and the jingle of sleigh-bells. And this was Hardluck's place in the sun with his swamper Two Dog.

CHAPTER SIX

"Pick Up the Rocks . . ."

HARDLUCK always stopped on his way out of town at the big barn where Barney Devlin stabled the teams that hauled the ore from his Bear Gulch Mine to the mill. He stopped there each time on Devlin's orders. To pick up a couple or three stout, heavy boxes that were nailed shut and tagged and labeled with the name of a mine assayer firm at Helena, Montana.

"Them's ore samples," Barney Devlin said. "I go into the Bear Gulch Mine every damn' day and pick myself a little sack of ore samples. At the end of the month them samples goes to the assayer at Helena for his true assay—and a close record kept in his book. That way I'll know if she's a-payin' or when the ore assays and it's time to unload the mine on some rich sucker. Pick up them boxes of ore samples on your way out, Hardluck. When you get to Milk River, drop 'em at the express office at the depot. And don't git drunk and fergit to git a receipt from the station agent. I don't want them rocks lost in the shuffle."

The boxes were always there in the harness room. Hardluck would lug them out and dump them in one of his wagons. Rocks, Barney Devlin called his ore samples. Once, when Hardluck had gotten drunk or forgetful and forgot to dump his boxes of rocks at the express depot and hauled the damned nailed boxed plumb back to the Little Rockies, Devlin had cussed him out like he had committed some big crime.

"Remember, Hardluck," Devlin said when he took Smith and Moore into the Bucket of Blood to buy them a drink and a saucer of beer for each shaggy sheepdog, "to pick up your rocks."

Devlin seemed to have recovered his temper about the cigars. He said he'd get along with what he had on hand. That he'd pick 'em up himself the next time he drove through Red Lane. And for Hardluck to not forget to pick up the rocks.

"Probably be the last time you'll be bothered with the damn' rocks, Hardluck."

"Meanin' Bigfoot or the Hartman boys will do all your haulin'."

"Meanin'," Barney Devlin's wide grin was twisted a little with something like nostalgic sadness, "I'm unloadin' the Bear Gulch Mine. Looks like I've found me a sucker. I've throwed in Timberline for boot."

Timberline was nowhere in sight. The gunslinger who had always shadowed Devlin for a bodyguard, wasn't around. But Hardluck asked no questions. But he knew that there had been a break between Devlin and Tim-

berline the night of the attempted hold-up at Half Way House. Hardluck downed his drink and motioned Two Dog and Two Dog picked up the empty beer saucers and handed them to the bartender with his mild little old grin of gratitude.

Barney Devlin watched Hardluck haul his empty wagons down the street to the loud cheering and colorful profanity. He watched until Hardluck had lugged the three heavy boxes out of the harness room at the big barn and dumped them in his lead wagon, then drive on, chains clanking, sleighbells jingling.

Then Devlin walked alone to the barn and told the barn man to harness his team of trotters to his green-wheeled buckboard.

"Don't forget," said the barn man, "tomorrow's Bear Gulch payday."

"I'll be back," Barney promised, "to pay the hardrock byes."

TWO DOG MOORE picked up the gossip sometime after midnight while they made the rounds of the saloons, and he passed it on to Hardluck for what it was worth.

"They're claimin' the Bear Gulch has flooded-out, Hardluck," Two Dog told Smith. "They struck water below and the pumps can't handle it. They're sayin' tomorrow is payday and Devlin ain't got enough money left to meet his payroll. Now they claim Barney's hauled freight, leavin' them Bohunks and Cousin Jack hardrock miners to whistle a hungry tune for the pay they got comin'.

"The barn man says Devlin had his fastest team hooked up and pulled out at dark. The Little Rockies claims that Devlin's gone busted and run away, with a getaway stake he's had hid out against such a day."

"That's a damned lie!" Smith's bearded lips snarled and he bellowed a challenge in defense of the man who had stolen the Bear Gulch from him and Moore. "Barney Devlin might have gone busted, and, by the eternal hell, if he has, me'n Two Dog will be the ones to laugh the loudest and longest. But anybody says Devlin coyoted is a lowdown lyin' dog! And I'll swamp out the Bucket of Blood Saloon with all the Bohunks and Cousin Jacks that ever swung a single-jack or leaned on a muck-stick, if they make the talk that Devlin's left 'em holdin' an empty pay sack!"

A burly Bohunk hardrock miner took up Hardluck's drunken challenge, was tripped up by Two Dog, had the seat of his pants ripped by the two sheepdogs, and Hardluck's mud-caked fists, beating sledgehammer blows, smashed the Bohunk's face into a bloody pulp. Miners ganged up on Smith. Two Dog's battle cry fetched Bigfoot Sturman and his sons from Dutch John's Saloon across the street. The Hartman brothers waded in and the biggest ruckus the Little Rockies had ever witnessed was on.

Cowpunchers joined the freighters and a dozen fights waged up and down the street and in and out of the saloons. When the miners had been beaten and scattered the camp belonged to the freighters. They gave it to Hardluck Smith, Two Dog Moore, Bigfoot and his sons, and the Hartman boys, and Hardluck held forth in the Bucket of Blood and drank to the Red Lane while they waited for sunrise and Devlin's return.

"If that Irish son don't show up with his payroll," Smith roared, "we'll have to sell our freight outfits for enough dough to pay them muckers their wages an' run 'em outa the Little Rockies!"

"Barney Devlin," said one of the Hartman boys, "musta gone to dig up his payroll."

"Timberline," said Bigfoot Sturman, "close-trailed Barney a-horseback. I sighted him when he pulled out. Half an hour behind Devlin."

The stagecoach was late. Rule Horner said he'd been held up between Half Way House and the Little Rockies. He had no passengers aboard. A lone man in a yellow saddle slicker and a black silk handkerchief pulled up across his face had done the road agent job.

He told Horner he was after the Bear Gulch payroll. He made Horner cut open the locked mail sacks; he'd made the stage driver open every box, package and sack he had aboard. He made him empty the boot under the driver's seat. It had taken time. And by the time the fruitless job was done it had taken an hour or more, and cagey as the road agent had been about staying back in the night's black shadows, Horner had recognized him.

"It was Timberline," Horner said.

Nor was that all the news the driver fetched to the Little Rockies. Horner said he had to change his teams at Half Way House. Oscar Frye had done a too-thorough job of it this time when he gave his squaw her periodic whipping. Oscar had beat her to death and left her body in the kitchen. That, along with the rest of the log building, was a shambles. Devlin's private room had been ripped apart. It looked to Horner like Frye had been hunting for the money Barney was supposed to have cached at Half Way House. Money he sneaked in somehow and kept on hand to meet his payroll.

It looked like Frye had made a desperate bid for Devlin's cache, and had killed his squaw to keep her mouth shut. And, what with Timberline making his road agent bid for the same big South America stake, it appeared as though Barney Devlin was facing a crisis.

"You meet Barney and his buckboard along the road?" Hardluck asked.

"He swung around and into the sagebrush and went on without more than a wave of his hand," said Horner. "Like he'd matched a race against time, and for high stakes, and couldn't spare a second off. That was half an hour, or mebby an hour, before my stagecoach got held up by Timberline. I can't figure it out."

Hardluck told the driver not to warp his brain out of shape thinkin'. "Where was you held up, Horner?" he asked.

"At the foot of the Bear Gulch grade. You know, where the road dips on both sides to cross Beaver Crick. . ."

Smith downed his drink and nudged Two Dog Moore, who had gone to sleep in the corner with his pair of shaggy sheepdogs. "A man kin die in his sleep," said Hardluck.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Luck of Barney Devlin

THE barn man showed some reluctance about letting Hardluck Smith and Moore take one of Devlin's buggy teams and his lightest rig. But Hardluck shook some obedience into the man. Then he loaded in Two Dog and the pair of sheepdogs and drove away, holding the grain-fed team to a trot they could maintain mile after mile. Hardluck never touched the buggy whip. Nor did he intend using his freighter's long-braided, shot-loaded blacksnake whip on the blooded Hambletonian trotters. He handed Two Dog a nosebag partly filled with rocks the size of prairie chicken eggs.

This nosebag usually hung from Hardluck's saddle horn; the rocks had been selected along the road. Hardlock could pitch one of those rocks the length of his twenty-horse jerkline team and bounce it lightly off the rump of either lead horse. Or the rump of any horse on down the swing line. He could do that with ease—even as he had smashed the swinging lamp that night at Half Way House with a bottle.

"I got a little argument," Hardluck held the team down to their best road gait, "to settle with that Barney Devlin."

He spat tobacco juice on the silver-painted wheels of Devlin's varnished hardwood light buckboard.

It was daybreak when they drove down the long slant of Bear Gulch grade. They were near the foot of the grade when Hardluck pulled the trotting team to a halt. He cocked his head sideways, listening. His elbow nudged Two Dog, who sat beside him with a shaggy dog cradled in each arm.

From below, in the dim light that was still dark-shadowed in the brushy canyon where the road crossed Beaver Creek, sounded the sharp, echoing crack of a gun. And through the echoes rasped the voice of Timberline.

"You got that payroll, Barney. I want it! I won't shoot to miss the next time."

"Are ye alone, Timberline?" Devlin's brogue was thick. It always thickened when he rought.

"I got Frye along."

"So I figgered, ye durty scut. Ye knew Frye murthered his poor squaw woman? 'Tis a foine pair av durty deuces ye are—ye double-crossin' mongrel scuts."

"Quit tryin' to blarney your way out of a tight, Barney. Damned slick you've bin, all these years. Never once have you let me pack an ounce of gold or a dollar of payroll money. It was dummy pig iron bricks painted with dirty gold leaf paint. Confederate money! Dummy packages. And me, riskin' my life every damned trip I made. And them was the same dummy fake gold bricks of bullion, the same counterfeit money packages you packed."

"Ye'd be the road agent that'd know, Timberline. You an' Oscar Frye. Wid' yer faces blacked an' yer voices disguised. But ye're right, Timberline. Since the furst clean-up at the mill. Since the furst payroll money come from Milk River, ye've niver bin trusted wid' a valuable bit av it. Fer the very reason ye just let out wid yer big mouth. You had yer pardner Frye hold ye up. And the durty pair av yez held me up. And it happened more than wanst. And netted ye nothin' but a waste av the time Oscar Frye is foriver lamentin! I played ye fer suckers."

"But not this time, Barney."

"That remains yet to be proved, Timberline. True, I've got the payroll wid me. I got it here in me rig. And ye've got the drop on Barney Devlin. And the Divil in Hell hates a welcher. I've had me standin' challenge, Timberline. And it holds till hell's no more. 'Tis double or nothin', Timberline!

"If the dirty pair av ye has the guts to gamble. But bejabers 'tis Barney Devlin that names the game. Ye'll fight me for it. Widout yer guns or a knife. Wid no holts barred a-tall, a-tall. And the winner takes the payroll money. And the bullion from the last an' final clean up av me flooded-out Bear Gulch Mine. . . ."

"And where's that bullion, Barney?" Timberline snarled.

"Where it's always bin each time it was hauled to Milk River. The same as the payroll money was fetched from Milk River to the Little Rockies. In the freight wagon av Hardluck Smith. The payroll money is still wrapped an' sealed in the cigar boxes. The same as the bullion is in them boxes I told Hardluck was ore sample rocks. Tough Hardluck Smith and his little old swamper Two Dog Moore that's hauled every ounce av gold from their

Bear Gulch Mine and fetched back the payroll in cigar boxes tied in an old bean sack and shoved into the jockey box. Where this payroll's bin in the jockey box av the wagon where Hardluck Smith dropped trail in the Red Lane."

Oscar Frye was drunk, and his cussing was foul and shrill. Timberline shut him up with a snarling curse.

"Double or nothin'!" Timberline's voice roared with an outburst of long pent-up fury. "The hell you say, Devlin! You've tipped your hand, you red-muzzled Shanty Irish son!"

"Nobody but Hardluck Smith," Barney Devlin's brogue thickened, "kin call me that, Timberline. Step out into the road, the durty pair av yez. I'll knock yer blocks off."

"You got your brains," Timberline's laugh was rasping, "pickled in the same brine as them fists you ain't gonna use no more. You got the payroll on you. And you told us where to find the bullion bricks. Shoot the belly off him, Oscar!"

A hundred yards up Bear Gulch Hill, Hardluck Smith kicked off the brake. His bellow spooked the trotting team into a run-away and flung its echoes through the pine-timbered Little Rockies.

"Forty years a freighter," Smith's bellow came down the hill grade ahead of his rig, "and I never dropped trail!"

BEFORE Timberline and Frye could get to their saddled horses, the run-away team was down the grade and on top of them.

Devlin let out a groan with a bit of a backslid Irishman prayer in it. He drove off the road and into the buckbrush, where he set his brake and twisted his lines around a wheel hub and in between the spokes. He was on the ground, crouched and moving fast. He paused just long enough to see Smith perform a miracle of horsemanship with one of Devlin's Hambletonian trotting teams. Hardluck straightened out the run-away team and drove it off the brush slant into the belly deep water of Beaver Creek, kicked the brake on and wrapped the lines around the buggywhip socket.

He tossed Two Dog Moore out onto the brushy bank. The sheepdogs swam ashore after their master. Hardluck stood on the buckboard seat, his coiled blacksnake in one hand, the nosebag half full of rocks in his other fist. Then he leaped to the far bank.

Timberline and Frye, guns gripped in their hands, were headed for where they'd left their saddled horses fifty yards from the road.

"Dog 'em out, Moore!" Hardluck yelled. "Set 'em afoot first!"

"Take 'em out, pups!" Moore's voice squeaked a little with excitement. "Put 'em out on grass!" He gestured wildly at the dogs.

The sheepdogs knew how to take a string of freight horses away from camp and out on good grass without getting kicked. They each swung to the tail of a saddled horse. The horses snorted and stampeded at the attack. They tried to kick loose the dogs that swung from their tails. The dogs hung till the horses got under way, then let go. Stirrups flapped and popped as the horses stampeded.

Hardluck's blacksnake was coiled around his neck. He held the nosebag in his left hand. His right hand dipped. The first rock he pitched hit Timberline in the head and dropped him in his tracks. While Timberline was down on hands and knees, Hardluck sighted Frye. The second rock struck the squawman in the small of the back; Frye screamed and went to his knees.

"They're your bear meat now, Barney!" Hardluck Smith called. He handed the nosebag to Two Dog Moore and took his coiled blacksnake from around his neck.

Timberline had a six-shooter in his hand. Barney Devlin came in fast, crouched. He kicked the gun out of Timberline's hand. Then he kicked the big gun-slinger up onto his feet.

"Ye kin take it layin' down, Timberline," Devlin's green eyes were glassy in the gray dawn, "or ye kin stand up like a man an' fight. And the bet still goes. Double er nothin' and the winner take all. No holts barred an' no mercy shown. Kill me if ye kin, Timberline. I'm after killin' the likes av you, ye scut!"

It was a fight that Smith and Moore would remember until the day they were dead. Timberline was fighting for his life with the strength and fury of a maniac. He towered above Devlin, his long arms had the reach, and he knew all the tricks of dirty fighting. The grassy sod was torn up under their booted feet as though it had been plowed and harrowed.

Now and then Oscar Frye would make a furtive reach for the six-shooter he packed in an open holster. Or for the sneak belly gun in an armpit holster. And each time he moved, crouched there on the ground, his back throbbing with pain where the thrown rock had raised a lump at the base of his spine, Hardluck's blacksnake would hiss and snap. And the wide buckskin popper that cracked like a pistol and had seldom done more harm to a horse than flick horseflies, would bite a chunk of cloth and hide and drop of blood. And Oscar Frye would yelp with pain like a damned coyote.

Devlin was beating Timberline to death. Slowly, relentlessly, without mercy. Timberline's face was beaten to a shapeless pulp.

His eyes were bloodshot and blinded by sweat and dirt and blood. He was slobbering, cursing and begging for his life. But if Devlin heard him he gave no sign. He beat Timberline to his knees and then kicked him in the throat. The kick shattered Timberline's Adam's apple, crushing the cartilage of the larynx. Horrible noises came from Timberline's slack, blood-spewing mouth and then the sounds choked in a rattle and Timberline lay there dead.

BARNEY DEVLIN was battered, his face an ugly mask of dirt, sweat and blood. His clothes ripped and torn and his hairy barrel chest, glistening with blood and sweat, was heaving. But he paused only long enough to wipe the sweat from his eyes and spit blood. Then he charged Oscar Frye.

The squawman yelped and jerked his sneak gun. Hardluck's blacksnake whip lashed out and coiled around the man's wrist. The short barreled gun exploded as it fell.

Then Devlin went after Frye. And there was no mercy in his eyes.

"You murdered your squaw, Frye. Mebby this beats hangin' . . . I wouldn't know. Let's save time, eh, Oscar. Let's . . . not . . . waste . . . any . . . more . . . time. . . ."

Devlin's fists battered each word into the screaming, blood-spattered face of the squawman. Then the tough Irishman, who had learned the fighting trade on San Francisco's Barbary Coast, began using each deadly punch he had studied and it took him less than one prize ring timed round to kill Frye.

Barney Devlin stood there on stocky legs, his chest heaving, battered fists blood-smeared and skinned, his wiry, graying red hair sodden. There was a lopsided grin on his face and his hard green eyes were slivers of bottle glass in bruised, swollen sockets. He stared down at the two dead men. Then his right fist slowly unclenched and he crossed himself.

"God fergive Bernard Devlin this sunrise," his battered lips whispered "for breakin' the Commandment that says Thou Shalt Not Kill! Ye'll no doubt have more mercy on their souls than their carcasses got from the fists av Barney Devlin. Amen. . . ."

He walked to the creek and crawled into the cold water on all fours like a hurt animal and he lay there for a time in the water, letting the swift current work on him.

"There's a crock in my rig, Hardluck. Fetch it. And when we've had a bit av a nip, we'll drive on to town. Wid enough money to meet the Bear Gulch payroll. And a dollar left over fer jug money. . . ."

Hardluck found his voice. "You red-muzzled, Shanty Irish son!"

They loaded the dead men into the rigs and Two Dog tied the two saddled horses alongside and the sun was rising when they drove, Barney Devlin's rig in the lead, into town.

Barney Devlin paid off his Bear Gulch miners. The flooded mine was shut down. Perhaps it would re-open when they got pumps that would take off the water. Perhaps not. Devlin wired his rich sucker that the deal was off. He signed it with the names of Hardluck Smith and Two Dog Moore along with his Barney Devlin signature.

Rule Horner took his first shipment of Bear Gulch bullion in by stagecoach. The money was to be banked to the joint account of Smith and Moore.

Devlin, Hardluck and Two Dog, and his pair of Scotch sheepdogs, celebrated, and the Little Rockies joined in the celebration. Barney told and re-told the story of how Hardluck Smith had hauled the Bear Gulch Mine payroll money and the gold bullion.

The bogged wagon with its load of barbed wire stayed bogged in the cement-like dried gumbo of Red Lane. While Barney located men like Hardluck Smith and Two Dog Moore on the choice homestead acreage on both sides of Red Lane. And the stage line and Half Way House were leased to Rule Horner. . . .

The Hartman boys and Bigfoot Sturman and his stalwart sons flatly refused to pick up the thousand dollar bet. Or haul a pound of Barney Devlin's freight. They drank to it while they celebrated.

"To Hardluck Smith and Two Dog Moore. The freighters that never dropped trail!"

The wagon in the broad middle of the Red Lane remained there. And on the weathered canvas top somebody had painted:

"HARDLUCK SMITH. THE FREIGHTER WHO NEVER DROPPED TRAIL!"

THE END

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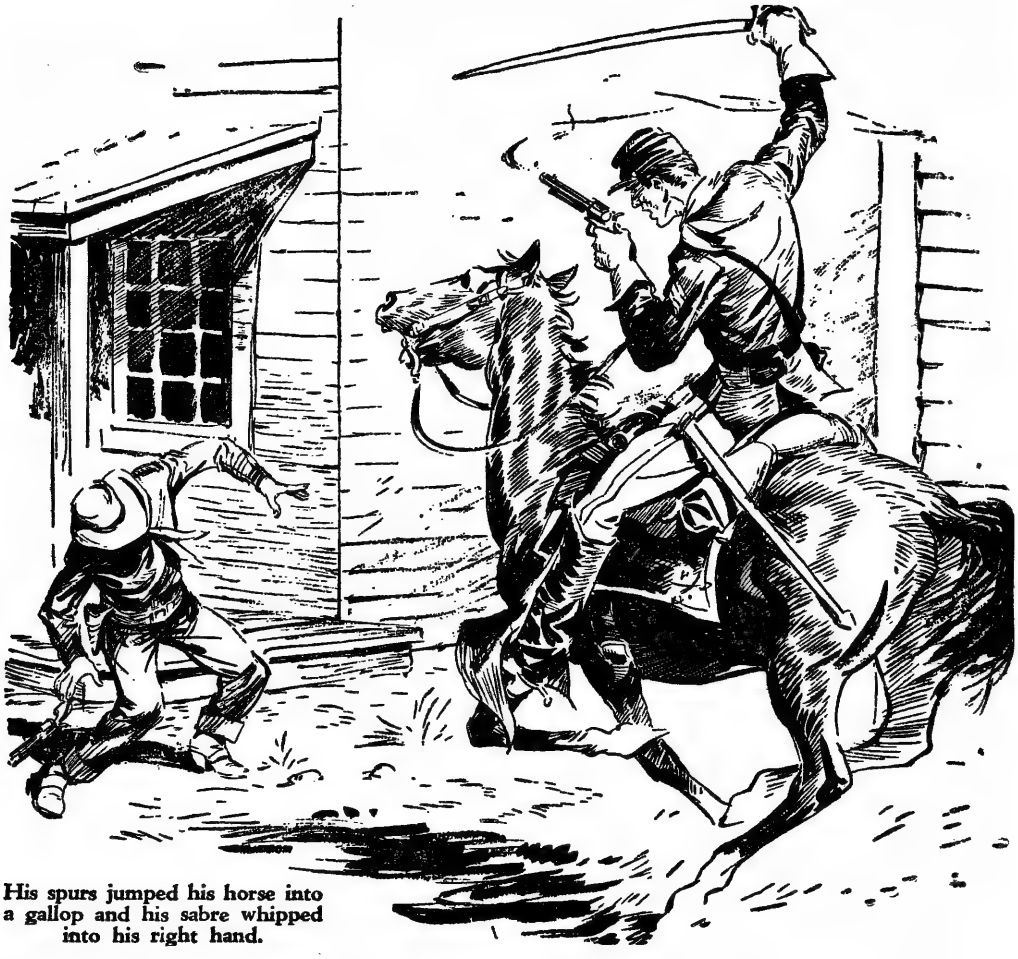

His spurs jumped his horse into a gallop and his sabre whipped into his right hand.

OFF DUTY

By STONE CODY

Cavalry Sergeant Kane turned to Kenelly and Schwable. "Roll 'em up!" he said curtly. "No quarter to anybody! When we get to the end of the line, we wheel—at command, mind you—and come back to clean up them that's took cover. On the second charge, it's every trooper for himself. Let's go!"

SERGEANT KANE drew up on the top of the ridge and saw the town of Tapulpa before him. It looked pleasant, he thought, largely because of the cottonwoods in the late afternoon light. He moved his right leg back a little so that his thigh felt the bulge of the saddlebag containing the twenty thousand dollars. It did not feel ominous to him now, merely agreeable because it was there. For now the way lay clear before them. Down in town. . . .

He waved Kenelly in from the flank and then saw that Schwable, riding a hundred paces ahead, had pulled up and was looking back. He signaled Schwalbe, too, to come in.

"Trot—ho!" he said briefly, when they had fallen in behind him.

There hadn't, he told himself, been any danger. He had kept Kenelly riding flank

wherever there was a possibility of ambush—sign of arroyo or ridge that might conceal an enemy. And Schwable had been sent out as point or drawn back as rear-guard, as the terrain seemed to indicate. But that had been merely routine, the kind of thing any seasoned soldier would have done or been court-martialled, if need be, for not doing.

There had not been any danger. If there had been, the major would have sent more men.

They entered the outskirts of the town and Schwable's horse began to fall behind. "Close up!" Sergeant Kane ordered curtly.

"He's kind of played out, Sarge," Schwable said, spurring half-heartedly.

Kane turned and looked at him, and the spurring became considerably less half-hearted.

They rode down Tapulpa's main drag, their uniforms nearly white with alkali dust, their horses sweat-streaked and trembling-legged with fatigue, and drew up at command before the express office.

Kane dismounted stiffly and loosened the strap of his saddle bag. He pulled out the packet containing the twenty thousand in bills and walked with it into the express office.

The bald clerk, with sideburns and a flowing mustache and the pallor of a man much indoors, eyed him with surprise and a little alarm.

"Gov'ment funds, Indian Agency," Kane told him briefly. "For the bank at Tucson."

The clerk's eyes widened. He paled even further, it seemed to Kane. "The—stage don't leave until tomorrow," he said uneasily.

"I don't run the stage—or this office," Kane said dryly. "My orders are to deliver this to you, an' get a receipt. Here's the receipt form. Count the money an' sign."

The clerk threw him a look and took the money. "You don't know what you're askin'," he observed morosely. "This town—" He broke off, with an apprehensive look toward the doorway, where there was nothing to see except Schwable and Kenelly on guard. "Of course, you don't give a hoot," he ended bitterly.

"I do not," Kane said grimly. He was aware that he was bone-tired. Twenty desert miles since dawn, with the responsibility of twenty thousand dollars in government money, had made quite a day. He didn't know what this clerk was beefing about and he didn't care. An officer should have been sent with that money. Regulations required it. The major had taken a chance on Kane because there wasn't any officer to send. The additional responsibility hadn't made it any easier. If Kane had failed it wouldn't have been only Kane and twenty thousand up the spout, it would have been the major's neck, too, officially.

Kane had served with the major a long time—nine heat-stricken, Apache-ridden years, in fact. He didn't know whether he liked the major or not. The major was a martinet. He would bust Kane, or any other non-com, at the drop of a hat—bust him clean into prison if the hat-dropping was illegal enough. When he sent Sergeant Kane on duty for which regulations required an officer, he asked no favor. If Kane failed, he would, if he lived, get what was coming to him. The major would then, still asking no favors of anybody, take what was coming to him.

Oh, the major was a man, all right, but—to hell with him. Kane decided suddenly that he did not like the major.

HE TOOK the signed receipt and went out feeling empty. That was the Army for you. You got saddled with a responsibility that wasn't yours; you rode a day's ride on the outskirts of Hell; you rode taut, looking for trouble that never came; and then you ended up relaxed and empty, with no trouble, no good work and no thanks from anybody—least of all from the stiff-necked, marble-eyed, mule-headed, bitter-tongued son of unmentionable parents whose ancestry was thus and so and not of the sort for a decent ex-muledriver to lay a comparatively delicate ear to, and who had sent you on this dusty errand.

"Say, Sarge." Kenelly spoke eagerly.

"Listen," Kane said, narrow-lidded and savage, "we take our mounts to the livery barn an' take care of them. Then you two garbage heads go out an' get drunk or shack up with some señorita or spend the night walkin' on your hands. But I wanta tell yuh something. You get into trouble in this town an' I'll put you in the hoosegow for so long your beard'll be growing down through the cracks of the floor. You think you can remember that?"

Kenelly looked abashed. "Shore, Sarge, shore," he said uncomfortably.

Schwable giggled nervously. A few years earlier, Sergeant Kane, then Corporal Kane, had busted Schwable's narrow nose for giggling that way, before he understood that it wasn't anything but a nervous affliction. Now he merely glared and led the way to the stable.

Schwable, he thought gloomily, never would make a cavalryman. Didn't have the temperament for it.

There was, of course, the time when they had tangled with Running River's band of Apaches and Schwable had charged a nest of six of them, and killed two and sent the others scrambling out of cover so that more sensible men could shoot them down. Sheer funk, Kane guessed it was. Scared white-livered and lost his fool head. But then there were two kinds of recruits: those who got scared out of their wits and charged ahead and those who charged in the opposite direction. A soldier knew, and valued, the difference.

Kane started for the hotel. A hundred yards up the street a hard-looking man with a jut of jaw accosted him.

"This town's on the clean-up, soldier," he said brusquely. "I'll warn you to keep out of trouble here. We've had soldiery around before, an' don't like it. While you're here, check your shootin' irons with me."

Kane stared at him in honest amazement, found himself looking into cold, indomitable gray eyes. He read indented letters on a badge: "Marshal." Behind the jut-jawed, iron gray man stood a youngster, wedge-shaped, grim-mouthed, thumbs hooked into gun-freighted belts.

All at once Kane laughed. The thing was too damn funny.

But after an instant, his laughter died. This was, he understood, maybe a bad spot.

"You're marshal of this town, ain't you?" he asked.

"I am. Marshal Slag McRay."

"That makes you the boss," Kane said. He flipped the impeding flap of his holster open and pulled the gun from it and tossed it in his palm. "That makes you the boss for all the civilians," he went on, his voice hardening. "Me, I'm Sergeant Kane, 2nd U. S. Cavalry, here on gov'ment duty. Nobody takes my sidearms but my commanding officer. You're way out of line, mister."

They stood there, the three of them, glaring at one another, with Kane feeling the temper tearing up in him, and the wish was with it that one or both of these fool civilians would try to make something of it.

But it was the chill gray eyes of the marshal that gave way first.

"Mebbe you can get away with this," he said curtly. "I ain't just sure of my rights in this. But I'm warnin' you again—keep out of trouble. There ain't enough damn Army in the country to keep you out of jail or Boothill if you don't."

Kane eyed him bitterly. "Keep your townies from making trouble," he said, "an' maybe you won't have trouble. Meanwhile, I've give you a little warning. You try to take their arms away from my men an' you'll be beggin' for grief, not only from them but from me—an' the Army of the United States. In case you ever heard of them states."

He turned stiff-legged and walked off—toward where the sign said "Tapulpa Hotel and Chuck Lover's Dining Room."

On the way to the hotel he felt the usual hostility toward the army, to which he was accustomed. It seemed accentuated somehow. He tried to put it out of his mind. Between soldiery and the civilians there was always this senseless enmity. Senseless? At bottom maybe. Yet there was a gap, an enormous gap. Imagine that lunk-headed marshal thinking he could disarm a soldier on duty!

Kane laughed aloud. A slit-eyed puncher shot a bitter glance at him, passed, swaggering, his gun-freighted thighs somehow an open offense.

Kane became aware that the tension in the town was greater than he had understood Men lined the boardwalks, armed, silent, grim Hell, he guessed, was not far from popping On the clean-up, huh? Maybe the marshal was in for more than he knew.

Kane grinned suddenly. It wasn't any business of his.

He had accomplished his mission. Besides he was used to the dumb sneer of "Yellow-leg." All he had to do was to get a night's sleep and pull out in the morning. Still, the grin thinned. His strong and able nerves had been whipped by desert sunlight and desert dust and strain. Their rawness had been sand papered briefly but decisively by a dumb headed marshal and his deputy.

COLD-EYED and hostile, he requisitioned quarters for three from a buck-toothed hotel clerk and went to his room.

He took off his uniform and dusted it carefully. His saddle roll yielded clean cotton and socks. He draped them over the bed and went to the washstand, pouring from the cracked pitcher into the chipped basin and scrubbing himself carefully from head to foot.

Some of the irritation in him began to draw off. But enough remained so that when a knock came on the door his temper flared. So this buck-toothed hotel clerk couldn't let a man clean himself up. . . He took two fast strides and whipped the door open wide.

A girl stood there.

Kane gasped. The girl gasped. They stood looking at one another for an endless time maybe a tenth of a second. The girl was slender, high-headed, dark-haired, gray-eyed.

They both moved at once. The girl gave a little cry and fled, as Kane hastily closed the door.

Later, he went down to the street. He walked from one end of it to the other, but the girl was not in sight. Afterward he turned toward the outer town.

The section through which he walked looked good. The streets were shaded by big cottonwoods and willows. Most of the houses were painted and had struggling green lawns with flowers and shrubs in them—cannas and nasturtium and Spanish dagger and pepper bushes and morning glories climbing up porches. The late sun made long, peaceful shadows that deepened the grass-green and flower-brilliance into serenity. Kane's desert charred eyes feasted here gratefully. His mind compared it to the harsh barracks and glaring parade ground of the fort "If a man had any sense. . ." he muttered, and felt nos-

talgia bite into him for all the things his harsh and barren life lacked.

A woman came out onto a porch and looked at the low sun and then fixed her eyes on Kane for a short moment before she turned them anxiously toward town. Kane could see the strain along her thin cheeks and in the corners of her eyes. It came to him that there was no peace here, either.

It seemed a shame that this pleasant neighborhood should know fear and the bitter overhang of anxiety. Civilians, he thought, were a queer crew. Couldn't get along with one another. In the service now, a savvy hombre didn't go hunting trouble. There was plenty of that to do anybody. Oh, there might be a fist-fight or so if a man got a little red-eye in him. But this kind of thing, no!

A woman built like a flat-bed wagon popped out of a doorway, tossed Kane a measuring, hostile glance and then turned, narrow-eyed and estimating, toward the sun.

"Sunset, as usual," Kane thought bitterly. "Why do they always make it sunset?"

At the fort men would be standing Retreat, with the flag coming down and the band playing. It wasn't much of a band in a battalion post but the music was there. It made a man feel good. There was peace in it, and discipline and order. It meant that another one had been polished off and stacked away—another one in the ranked and serried procession of the ordered days. And then that girl was there, and his thoughts of the post fled Kane's mind like cloud shadows chased by the wind. She was standing at the gate of a yard enclosed by a white-painted picket fence.

Kane's breath caught at the sight of her, because her motionless figure seemed to sway as young willows did, with an inner instinct of grace in its flowing slenderness; because of the warm and sweet and generous curve of her mouth: as warm as the gray of her eyes.

Sergeant Kane's hand touched the brim of his service hat in his best salute. "Ma'am," he said, "I'm mighty sorry. I been lookin' for you. I wasn't expectin' any lady."

Her eyes warmed still further, the corners of them laughing at him gently. "Maybe we had better forget that incident, Sergeant," she said.

Kane pulled his breath in and let it out. "Yes ma'am," he said. "But—you wanted to see me?"

Her face sobered. "Yes, I did. My father is marshal of this town. Until now Vince Sugrue has run it. Sugrue is a saloonkeeper and gambler and murderer. He's—he's plain bad. He's pulling in all sorts of bad people—gunmen and low women and tinhorns, and he's getting rich and getting his grip on just about everything in town. Most people are afraid of him and men that stood against him have been drawn into gunfights and killed, or have just been mysteriously found dead. It's got so you can't live without kow-towing to Sugrue. Well, the people—the decent people elected dad to clean the town up. And dad has been waiting and looking to get something on him."

SHE paused and drew a long breath, and Kane stood rigid. He knew now what was coming and the swift, excited elation which the sight of her had raised in him drained out now through the soles of his boots.

"Day before yesterday," she went on rapidly, "Gus Hendricks was killed. There wasn't ever anybody sweeter or decenter than Gus. He had stood out against Sugrue, because he was gentle and good and—brave."

Kane felt an acid and hopeless bitterness build up in him.

"Well, the trail led straight to Sugrue. Dad wasn't dead certain he could make it stand up in court, but it was close enough so that he told Vince Sugrue that he would close up all his places, and that if he and all his gang weren't out of town by sunset tonight, he'd take Sugrue in for murder. It—it was, of course, just a way to force a showdown."

Her hands clenched, white-knuckled at her sides. "The trouble is—well, dad hasn't got enough people on his side. It's—it's shameful. They won't come out in the open until they know which way this thing is going to jump. Dad has maybe six or eight men he can depend on, and Sugrue has got twice that many, or more. You see?" She looked at him with a kind of agony and appeal in her eyes.

Kane looked back at her, feeling the emptiness and despair and desperate astonishment in him. "And you want me—us—to help, ma'am?" His tone implied what he felt.

"Why not?" she blazed at him. "You—you're soldiers, aren't you?"

He looked at her and dead black hopelessness was in him. He thought that he never would understand a civilian or what a civilian felt.

"It's because we're soldiers that we can't help," he said heavily. "You—I reckon you don't understand."

"You're like the others," she told him hotly. "You're afraid."

The charge sobered him, pulled him up out of the black depression that held him.

"This is a civilian matter, ma'am. The army hasn't been called in by any—any—constituted authority." He had a moment of absurd and unreasonable pride because he had remembered a phrase like that. It made up to him somehow for the sense of inferiority he had felt when she said "forget that incident" and for the smooth and educated flow of her speech in general. "There's not anything I

can do. You're smart enough to know that."

He started to turn away to avoid the stricken look in her eyes, but curiosity held him for a moment.

"If it was this important to you," he asked, "how come you didn't wait to palaver?"

Her chin came up proudly. "I was—was upset. And then when I got back to the street I heard about what happened between you and dad, and—and I was afraid it was hopeless. But—I was coming back. I was on my way when I saw you coming down the street. Now I see it was hopeless."

He said heavily, "Not for any of them reasons, ma'am."

He turned away then, knowing that he was finished here.

He knew, too, as he walked back toward town that regret was a stabbing wound inside his chest. He had had a brief dream—a dream in which he had seen himself somehow, vaguely, established here, with this exquisite, warm-eyed girl at his side. That was over now, unless he did what she wanted him to do.

A sudden, sardonic, bitter amusement filled him. Civilians! A vision came to him of what the major would say and do if he mixed in.

He was aware that a shadow lengthened with a kind of jerk, and then began to pale. Sundown.

He turned into the main street, and the thing was before him—a bitter play which he did not want to see.

The marshal and his deputy were walking up the middle of the street, five men flanking them and a little behind them.

Ahead of them, in front of the Eagle Nest Saloon, perhaps a dozen obvious gunmen awaited them. In the center of this group a big, arrogant man, dressed in a fine broadcloth frock coat and trousers over fancy calfskin boots stood with a contemptuous, quiet smile on his face.

Kane knew at once that this was Vince Sugrue. He saw the wide blue eyes of the man, and the cruel confidence in him, and there was in him suddenly a violent antipathy and a reluctant admiration.

For the jut-jawed, cold-eyed man who approached him, the admiration was more willing, with regret and sadness in it. They came down the street, with the dust going up in little puffs under their bootheels. And there were no shadows now. Only a clear light in the air and an imperceptibly growing grayness on the ground.

Kane saw that three of the men with the marshal carried double-barreled shotguns and he guessed that this was because they weren't much hands with the sixguns they had belted on.

He shook his head, holding the regret in him down to the cool impartiality of a spectator. If the other side had any sense those three would be shot down pretty quick. A buckshot scattergun, though brief, could be definitely destructive.

He saw Schwalbe and Kenelly show up in an alley-way across the street. Kenelly, weaving slightly, was obviously drunk. "Began quick and followed through plenty," Kane thought with the cynicism of long experience and, just now, an unreasonable sense of resentment.

Schwable looked reasonably sober. "Beer drinker," Kane thought with approval and mild scorn.

But he had no time to consider his men now. The steady, grim group had gone past the express office and Marshal Slag McRay's voice lifted: "Sugrue, you're under arrest."

Sugrue's voice lilted back at him, mellow and amused and scornful. "So you say, Slag. Try to drag your irons and see how far you get with it."

"I'm draggin' 'em now, Vince," McRay snapped. "Try to match me."

HIS hands blurred, the guns clearing leather before the eye could see them. Kane's breath was stopped at the speed and dexterity of it. He knew in the instantaneous flash of thought that he had been privileged to watch the flash draw of a master gunman. Yet in the split second when the muzzles of McRay's guns cleared leather, the flat, slapping crack of a carbine ripped from a roof-top and McRay's body jerked.

His sixguns exploded in the same instant and Sugrue's gunhand, filled at this moment with a shoulder hideout gun, dropped paralyzed at his side.

Gunfire slammed along the street in a sudden bewildering roar. Kane saw two of the men with shotguns go down and knew with a brief, grieved satisfaction, that he had been right. The other shotgun man fired twice. His first barrel took a gunman in the stomach and dropped him. His second shot, went too high and far, hit another in the shoulder and spun him.

McRay had pulled himself together after the first bullet hit him and his guns were doing deadly work. Beside him, grim and equally dangerous, was the wedge-shaped deputy who had been ready to shoot Kane down.

Kane realized that there were three men with rifles on roof-tops, and that they belonged to the Sugrue crowd. His emotions, whipped up by the sudden flare of this fracas, calmed down suddenly. He had a grim realization that he was being witness to an almost magnificent stupidity. The other man with the shotgun was down now. That left four. And as he thought this, one of the four staggered and went down on one knee.

The odds were hopeless. "Why doesn't he pull back and attack from another quarter?" Kane asked himself disgustedly.

At almost the same instant, McRay yelled, "Back! Pull into the express office!"

Kane groaned. This was the nearest shelter, but it was a trap.

The three who could walk obeyed, backing, shooting, toward the door of the express office, until they all tumbled in there intact.

The man who had gone down on one knee tried to crawl toward the alleyway where Kane was. A bullet hit him somewhere and he stood up and began walking, staggering, back down the street. Three men shot at him and he stopped short and buckled over. Two bullets had smacked dust out of his shirt and one of them started a red smear exactly over his spinal column. Ase he went down Kane knew that his back had been broken.

The gunfire stopped then, with a dead silence over the street, like the center of a hurricane when all wind and movement dies.

The street was a shambles. Kane saw that five men were down on the other side. That left seven, and three on the rooftops—ten. No, eleven. There was a hatchet-faced, flare-eyed kid emerging from a space between two buildings up the street. Eleven against three, and two of those wounded. It was over.

Kane felt anger in him and disgust. He thought he never had seen a poorer action. The whole thing was an offense to his professional pride. Brave? Hell, what good was bravery if you got yourself into a fix like that?

His mind accurately reconstructed the express office. It was a shell of a thin-walled wooden building with three sides blank and the only windows in front, flanking the door. The counter inside would be the only thing offering any protection and that was no place to shoot from.

Civilians!

And that girl had wanted him to horn into this! The anger took him by the throat and shook him.

The Sugrue gang had spread out now in a straggling semi-circle wherever they could find a semblance of cover from which to make a ragged half-moon of fire about the front and sides of the express office. And the firing began again, the gambler in the fancy clothes shouting orders.

Two of this crowd ran down the space between the express office and the general store, and shortly their guns began to sound behind the office.

It came to Kane that they had run down the alleyway where Kenelly and Schwable had been, and his mind told him that those two had disappeared some minutes before.

"Had sense enough to pull out," he thought grimly, remembering what he had said to them about keeping out of trouble. If he had any sense he'd pull out himself.

There was a shot up the street and a sharp commotion. He moved swiftly to the other side of his alley, to see the finish of that. The McRay girl must have come charging down the street, frantic because her father was in danger. Somebody with sense had reached out from a doorway and was dragging her, struggling, in. There was still a wisp of smoke rising from the Winchester in her hands. Kane heard her cry, "Let me go!" in the tones of a furious bobcat, and a man's voice saying, "You little fool, Nita, they'll shoot you just like they would your father."

Kane thought, with a kind of cold fury, which was mixed with contempt for the lot of them, that that was true.

His thought was interrupted by the pound of hoofs behind him. He looked back to see Kenelly and Schwable, mounted, leading his own mount up to him.

"And what the hell do you think you're up to, you damn bat-eared snivel-nosed recruits!" he snarled.

"Shucks, Sarge," Kenelly said placatingly. "There was kind of action goin' on. We—we thought—we kind of thought you'd like the hosses."

"Cavalry," said Schwable nervously, "is a weak arm when dismounted."

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KANE beat his fists, at the end of arms shaking with rage, on his thighs and fought for control. *They* wanted him to get into this, too. He thought that he would smash that thin nose of Schwable's so far into him this time that it would look like a carbuncle on the back of his neck. And Kenelly . . .

"Get pitch and cotton," Sugrue's voice snarled. "We'll burn 'em out an' shoot 'em down like rats."

Kane's nerves quieted suddenly.

"Our money's in there," he said, staring at Kenelly and Schwable. "Gov'ment money. If they burn the building, the money will burn. I want two volunteers—you and you!"

"Shore, Sarge," said Kenelly, and the pleasure in his face was clearly visible.

Schwable bridled. "They're sure tough odds, Sarge," he said nervously.

Kane looked at him, and Schwable's cheeks paled slightly. "It ain't that I'm not willin', Sergeant," he said hastily.

Kane said grimly, "We'll take 'em from the flank. They're spread out in a curved line along the street. We'll come in from the left and roll 'em up. Fall in!"

They rode back down the alley and out along a space two buildings down. Kane looked down the street and saw the disposition of the enemy and thought that he might give them warning. He might give them warning if he was a plain damned fool, ready to risk the lives of his men on a point of so-called honor. He remembered the wounded, possibly dying men who had been shot in the back and grinned bitterly. Civilians! He remembered McRay walking bravely and nakedly down the street, with no protection for his flanks, and none for his rear, and nothing to take up the slack in front. And he remembered that girl, whose eyes were warmer than he had ever seen.

"I'll give them exactly the same chance I'd give a band of Apaches that outnumbered us," he thought grimly.

He turned to Kenelly and Schwable. "Roll 'em up!" he said curtly. "No quarter to anybody! When we get to the end of the line, we wheel—at command, mind you—and come back to clean up them that's took cover. On the second charge, it's every trooper for himself. Let's go!"

Kane pulled his sixgun and his murder was deliberate. He fired, not as cattlemen did, from the hip, but as soldiers did, with the pistol held out and aimed and the finger delicate on the unfiled trigger. The Sugrue man nearest him died without knowing what had hit him. Kane swiveled his gun and shot faster, still with that delicate trigger squeeze at the man next down the line, and knew that he had missed. He was aware of Schwable and Kenelly's guns going beside and behind him, and then his spurs jumped his horse into a gallop and his sabre whipped into his right hand.

He was aware of curses and squawks of panic down the street, of a gun that blasted almost in his face, of sabering the arm of a gunman who lifted a flaring gun at him, of a Comanche yell at his side and Schwable, mount racing wild, charging past him, with gun and saber going, and then he was at the end of the line and, with lips pulled back over gritting teeth, shot a purely anonymous figure squarely through the brisket.

He pulled his excited, almost unmanageable horse up and whirled. Schwable ahead of him, charged fifty yards down an empty street before he could turn.

Kane, the lust of the fight full loose in him now, whirled and saw that the street was clear. He jumped his horse down the nearest alley, shot one man and, following another who fled, slapped him spinning with the flat of his sabre.

Plunging out of the alleyway, he met Schwable almost head on, swerved to avoid him. Schwable's racing horse struck Kane's mount with his shoulder, knocking him down.

Kane pulled his feet out of the stirrups and landed rolling, but his shoulder brought up against the boardwalk with a paralyzing jar. His rolling horse's front hoofs smacked down an inch or so from his head. He pulled himself up, scrambled into the saddle of his scrambling mount, disgustedly aware that there had been a man directly in front of him and that Schwable's impact had caused the man's gun to miss. He looked then and saw bitterly that the man who was about to kill him was dead, and Schwable was yammering at him, apologizing. He thought then that Schwable never would make a cavalryman, and he tried to think what he would do to Schwable when he got him back to camp. And then he was aware that there was a complete silence over the street, and he saw that Marshal McRay and his lean-hipped deputy were out on the street, and that the pale-faced drooping-mustached express clerk, with a sixgun in his hand, was with them.

McRay started toward him, staggering a little, but a skirted figure dashed in between and flung her arms about him, crying, "Dad!"

Kane watched the slender figure straining against her father, saw the warm, compassionate, adoring light in her eyes, and something in him melted altogether. A man who had a woman like that. . . .

The girl slipped out of her father's arms and flung herself as swiftly at the lean-hipped deputy. "Dave!" she cried passionately. "Dave, darling. I tried to come. I—oh, you're hurt!"

Kenelly rode up. His tunic was torn at the

shoulder and his trousers showed a reddening rip at the thigh.

"Where were you?" Kane demanded of him bitterly.

Marshal McRay cut in. "Sergeant, the Army sure saved our bacon that time. I—I reckon I owe you."

Kane looked at him. The lust of the fight had died out in him. All that was left was the eternal, unreasoning sickness of having killed and of having lost, as every man who has ever won a battle has lost—doubly lost this time, since it had been that wedge-shaped kid of a deputy all along, and the ancient, seductive dream of peace and love and kids in a quiet town was over.

"Go to hell," Kane said wearily.

IT WAS near sundown when they got there. The post looked nearly deserted in the still-hot blast of the lowering sun. It had been a long day—longer because their mounts were weary and had to be rated carefully. Longer, because of Kenelly's thigh and because Schwable never would be a cavalryman and because Kane's horse had been lamed by his fall.

Kane led the way to the stables and got down wearily. "Take care of them," he ordered briefly.

Schwable was gray-faced with fatigue. He turned to Kane and said for the tenth time that day, "Sarge, I'm sorry I—"

Kane looked at him and shook his head. "You'll never make a cavalryman, you Kraut!" he said. But his tone was relenting and Schwable's face expanded suddenly and the gray in it changed to something near pink.

Kenelly was looking at them both with a grin. "Report to the infirmary," Kane told him, and turned away.

He marched heavy-footed toward headquarters. He didn't have any doubt that the major would be there waiting for him.

"Sir, Sergeant Kane reporting," Kane said.

The major was bald and red-faced with round, pale, glinting blue eyes. He held himself straight, the column of his spine supporting a thick, muscular neck.

"Good evening, Sergeant," he said, level-voiced. "You delivered the money?"

Sergeant Kane took the express company receipt out of his pocket and put it on the desk. "Yes, sir," he said.

"No trouble?"

"In a way, sir," Kane said grimly, and made his report.

The major stared at him and sudden red mottled his cheeks.

"You mixed into a civilian affair?" he snapped. "You risked the lives of my troopers in a civilian brawl? Why—by God!"

The major controlled himself with an effort. His face now was very red.

"What reason had you?" he asked grimly.

Kane drew a long breath. "Sir," he said, "they were going to burn down the express office. Our money was in there."

He knew better than this, but he had to say what he could, as a soldier must.

The major let out a long breath. "So—our money was in there! Did you have this receipt before this ridiculous fracas began?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you knew damned well that the

(Please turn to page 98)

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Meadows and Gallard, Notice: You take trade that cost Navajo Company mucho money to got. The Indian they talk bad against you. This warns they may hurt you if you don't quit Chizhinbito. I do all I can to help you, but my hands are tied up if you stay. *Vaya!* Get out! Hurry! (Signed) Juan Machado, trader. . . .

A Hard-Hitting Novel of the Buckskin Frontier

CHAPTER ONE

Men Against the Wild

IT WAS a tough place to make a stalk. Peach Springs, they called it, from the stunted peach trees that clung to life in the wet earth below the seep. It lay in a curve between arms of the high red cliffs and the earth was littered with loose rock that made silent approach extremely difficult.

It was a place of many fires; the cliff face was smudged black. Here a piñon blaze crackled merrily and the succulent smells of sizzling goat ribs and browning Navajo corn cakes were tantalizing to the gaunt man who crept forward through the first full darkness. Beside the fire squatted three Navajos—two men and a woman, camping there to guard the pitiful crop of bitter fruit already showing the blush of approaching ripeness.

Gripping a short, stout club, Kerry Gallard

OR DIE!

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

bellied toward that fire, his blood-shot eyes riveted upon the carefully tended meat. His clothes were in tatters, his shredded bootsoles black with blood from rock-cut and cactus-pierced feet. He was thin, bearded, starving, desperate. He must get that meat and take it to Old Bill Meadows, who lay helpless, hidden in the *anasazi* cave, too weak from starvation and a bullet wound to move. They would eat and then, Kerry knew, they would die. For these Navajos would summon help and trail him.

He crept toward the fire, silent as a snake. The Navajos talked in their quiet, lipless way. A low laugh. Meat juices hissing on the coals. Kerry inched ahead. Rocks clicked under him, but the sound was muted by the crackling of the blaze. And the Navajos were intent upon their browning feast.

He was close now, little more than a rod away. He came to his knees, gathered himself. Unseen and unsuspected, a great, shaggy dog came up to the edge of the brush, his ears back, his hackles erected, a low growl shaking him. The warning woke two more mongrels and they came to their feet, barking. It was something Kerry hadn't figured on. He rose unsteadily, club upraised, a yell sheering from his lips.

The three Navajos rose from the earth as if jerked up, the woman screaming, the men bawling: *"Chindi!* Devils!" Like frightened quail, they darted from the fire and were instantly swallowed by darkness.

The bigger dog charged Kerry, who swung his club threateningly as he stumbled to the

Kerry met the rush with swinging gun. A pistol flamed in his face.

fire. It was now or never if he and Packsaddle Bill were to earn their faint chance to live. He lunged, stooped, caught the roasting kid, spun about and ran. The meat was hot, too hot to handle. Though he fought against the pain, his seared fingers failed him. He dropped his precious burden.

As he paused to pick up the ribs, the large dog lunged in, sinking its fangs in the calf of his leg. His club swung, crushing the beast's skull. He stooped for the goat meat, but the hunger of Navago dogs prevailed over the brute savagery of the other two. They seized the two steaming slabs and made off with them. Kerry yelled and gave chase. The combination of a loose bootsole and a stick of firewood upset his balance and hurled him to earth.

Kerry fell heavily, lay there a moment numbed with shock, sick with a sense of doom. Yonder, in the darkness, he could hear the dogs snarling over their pilfered feast, the crunch of bones. And, beyond them, the calls of the three Navajos, rallying one another against their age-old fear of ghosts and devils that command the night. Understanding their idiom, he knew they were coming back, and with grim intent. The will to live was still strong in him despite the failure. He came up like a drunken man and reeled away from that camp.

THE NAVAJOS, fearful of night spirits, did not pursue him. After a stumbling run of a hundred yards, he slowed to ease protesting muscles and heaving lungs. His weakened body cried out for food, but his real agony was the necessity of returning to Packsaddle Bill with word of another failure.

For many days, they had run and hidden. Kerry had hunted hard for the wherewithal to keep body and soul together. He had stalked prairie dog towns, trying vainly to cut off the fat little picket-pin gophers from their dens and slay them with stones. He had hunted the eggs of dove and quail, with less than token success. He had scratched the rocky earth for roots and tubers that hold little or no nourishment for starving men. Water from the skies had slaked their thirsts, but ill luck had dogged every effort to secure meat, right down to the Peach Springs failure.

Slogging dispiritedly under the stars, Kerry reflected bitterly upon the fateful year just ended, a year holding high moments of hope and despair. Son of a Bernalillo storekeeper, on the Rio Grande, Kerry had been raised at the edge of the Navajo country, early mastering the difficult idiom. When his father died, he spurned prosaic store trading and enlisted in the New Mexico Volunteers, under Colonel Kit Carson, for duty against the *Dine-é Anaaii,* the enemy Navajos beyond the Chuskai barrier.

During the campaign, which saw the complete scorching of Navajo gardens and utter defeat of their warriors, Kerry had occasion to save the life of Old Bill Meadows, known to the Navajos as *Hosteen Elthnaiai*—Mister Packsaddle—scout, packer and interpreter. Between these men, separated by the gulf of the years, sprang up a lasting friendship.

Old Bill, Taos man and early confrere of Kit Carson's, had long ago quit the fur brigades and their worries about declining catches and failing markets. He had married a Navajo woman and settled on watered land west of the Lukuchukais. It was natural that Kit should enlist him for his knowledge of the Navajo people. It seemed more than a bit unnatural that Kit should not be able to save Packsaddle's wife from the Long Walk to *Bosque Redondo,* into exile with ten thousand of her people.

Grieving and bitter, Packsaddle quit Carson's volunteers and, with Kerry, established a cattle and sheep outfit at *Chizhinbito*—The Place of the Black Rock Water. Here they fought drought, wolves and uncertain markets for four years, when General Sherman allowed the Navajos to return to their homeland. Trade was badly needed, so Bill and Kerry opened a post in their *hogan,* swapping sheep, turquoise 'dobe dollars and flour for blankets and the increasing output of silver jewelry from the anvils of silversmiths schooled during exile on the Pecos.

Tribesmen came from afar to trade with one they considered a Navajo, because of his marriage to a Navajo girl who had died in exile. And with his partner, the young *belagana* who spoke the language like a native. This trade brought quick profits, and war with the Navajo Trading Company, an outfit headquartering at Sage Springs and maintaining posts at the principle centers where Navajos foregathered.

First, the partners were warned by runner from Juan Machado, boss trader for Navajo Trading Company, known as *Nakai Tso*—Big Mexican—by the Navajos. The letter was crudely scribed:

> *Meadows and Gallard. Notice: You take trade that cost Navajo Company* mucho *money to got. The Indians they talk bad against you. This warns they may hurt you if you don't quit Chizhinbito. I do all I can to help you out, but my hands are tie up if you stay.* Vaya! *Get out! Hurry!*
>
> *Navajo Trading Company.*
> *Juan Machado*
> *Trader*

It roiled Packsaddle. "That fat slob's up to no good, Kerry."

"How much interest has he got?"

"Damned little, with anybody but the *Dine-é Anaaii*—them Injuns that still think they kin lick the world. Yuh see, Machado rid with

Black Horse, the renegade chief who kicked up the trouble that brought Kit Carson. Machado claims he was Black Horse's interpreter. Hogwash!"

"We don't move on his say-so," Kerry growled.

"No, siree. But he'll likely make us plenty trouble."

"And get it back—with interest."

THEIR defiance brought quick trouble, and interest was hard to pay. Their big freight wagon, rolling from Albuquerque with flour, sugar, coffee, tools and bolt goods, was ambushed in the Puerco Gateway, the Mexican driver slain and the goods stolen. They ran in a packtrain successfully and resumed trade, ready for war that somehow held off. One dark night they were roused from sleep by a mounted rifle attack, the real thing.

Their fierce resistance hurled back the first murderous assault, but there was a second and a third. Bullets from the rocks began to sieve their *hogan* dangerously. In the blackness of an overcast night, they quit the place and escaped by a long crawl that made it impossible to carry weapons. Afoot on a far hillside, they angrily viewed their burning hopes before starting the long walk for help.

Sixty-five miles to Wingate's soldiers. Nearly as far to the Navajo police, at the Defiance Agency. Each man carrying a knife and pistol, with five rounds between them. To make it worse, much worse, Machado acknowledged his connection with the outlaw *Dine-é Anaaii* by boldly flinging a cordon across all avenues of escape—well armed, splendidly mounted youths striving for Machado's bounty.

Turned back, narrowly avoiding capture, Kerry and Packsaddle struck savagely at Machado's supply line, burning two wagons in a swift attack, using their precious cartridges and failing utterly in their hope for ponies and guns. And Machado runners were circulating with word of reward for the fugitives—tempting indeed to people still needy after their long banishment.

Weeks of twisting, dodging, blotting trail. Hiding by day. Coyoteing by night. After a hundred disappointments, they had only just crossed the *Adlaanii* Plain, twenty miles from their burned post. They were starved, ragged, losing hope. Packsaddle, hit in the wagon attack, was failing fast. Kerry had broken his knife, digging for roots. Packsaddle had sunk his into a sheep only to see the wounded animal bear it away at a panicked run. And Machado's fierce partisans would not be thrown off the trail.

Now, after this last disappointment, Kerry paused on the talus, staring ruefully up at the cave where Packsaddle Bill lay helpless. He keened the night for menace and, finding none, commenced once again his painful ascent.

Before him, a winged demon plummeted to the talus with thrumming wings. A rabbit screamed as owl talons ripped his flesh. Kerry hurtled forward, his thrown rock striking the bird as it lifted its prey, knocking it down. The owl rallied, took flight, and Kerry pounced upon the mangled rabbit, his spirit strangely lifted by this break in the luck.

Resisting the will to sink his teeth into the warm, limp carcass, sobbing a little, he entered the cave with life for Packsaddle Bill. Hiding a tiny blaze behind crumbling *anasazi* walls, he roasted the hare, his love for his partner his only armor against his terrible lust for food.

"I'm leaving you this, Bill," he told the dull-witted sufferer on the pallet, "along with two *anasazi* pots of water. I'm heading for Sage Springs."

Packsaddle stirred. "You loco, younker? They'll kill yuh. Try fer Defiance."

"They'll expect that, partner, but never dream I'll show at Sage Springs. With luck, I'll kill Machado, pick up food, guns and horses and be back in two days."

Packsaddle argued against it, capitulating through weakness alone. "Go on," he said, finally. "Forget about me. I've lived three lives an' I'm about finished. Keep your hide whole. Git Machado. 'cause there'll be no peace while he's alive to keep the Navvies stirred up. Rebuild yore post 'cause it'll keep you good. Adios."

"Be back directly," Kerry choked. He gripped the limp, bronzed hand and ducked outside. Somehow he knew he'd never see Packsaddle again.

CHAPTER TWO

Trail of Death

FROM a shadowed cleft in the rimrock, Kerry watched the sun set on Sage Springs Post, a pretentious place. A sprawling house of mud-mortared native stone lazed under tall cottonwoods. Behind it, strung along the flat across Sage Creek, stood *hogans* of piñon and juniper—dwellings where Navajos wove blankets for trade, were available for menial tasks about the post and to carry out Machado's orders.

For hours, Kerry had watched trade come and go. Now, with the sun down and the sky a riot of color, he saw the girl leave the store and hurry to the corral—a girl in a red shirt, wide hat, halfboots with trailing spurs and tight-fitting denims revealing her slender form. A white girl!

She vanished in the stable and moments later emerged on a fractious pony, spurring across the flat and dipping into the brushy bottoms. At the same instant the arroyo swallowed her,

Kerry saw two Navajo men ride out from behind a jutting rock point, on his right. Finely mounted men, carrying rifles on their double-end native saddles. Save for moccasins, headband and conchaed clout belt, they were naked, bronzed as sandstone. Buffalo-hide shields on their left arms and bowguards on their wrists identified them as warriors—enemy Navajos who had avoided Kit Carson's round-up, who had vowed never to sign a peace paper or abide by one.

Kerry watched them. From the blockade, he thought. They've followed my trail and have lost me here. Their interest now was not on his trail. Excitedly, they stared below, watching the white girl, arguing in whispers. Coming suddenly to an agreement, they tied their ponies and slipped down the slope with only the knives at their belts.

Kerry didn't waste this bit of luck. Two vigorous ponies, two rifles and buckskin bags of *pinole*—parched corn and jerked meat, finely ground, all his for the taking. Food for Packsaddle, transportation to Defiance and weapons to stand off their enemies. Scenting his approach, the ponies swerved, snorted, strained at their yucca-fibre tie-ropes. Scorning their antics, Kerry leaped in, snatched the guns. Thus fortified, he took time to eat plentifully of the nourishing *pinole*. Never had food tasted so good.

With new strength running along his veins and the security of weapons intoxicating him, Kerry was wildly tempted to make Packsaddle wait, to go after Machado now. He examined the rifles, modern army weapons with a bag of cartridges for each. He might do it, but if he failed Packsaddle would starve. So he fought down the urge and was about to untie the ponies when he heard the scream from the creek bottom.

Kerry hadn't thought of those Navajos harming the girl. She belonged at the post. They worked with Machado if not for him. But that muffled scream brushed aside arguments, theories. A white girl faced trouble with his own enemies.

FORGOTTEN now were Packsaddle, Machado, his own physical weakness and the foolhardiness of taking long chances here. He stood a rifle in a cleft, made mental note of the place, untied the ponies and paused to watch them scramble away like goats, disappearing on the mesa above. Then, casting caution aside, he plunged down the slope.

Knifing recklessly through the fringe of creek timber, he sprinted across the creek, clawed up a brushy bank and broke into the clear to find one Navajo holding the horse while his mate struggled with the girl. She was silent now as she struck, bit and writhed, one foot still hung in the stirrup. As Kerry flung himself toward them, he saw the girl's face. She was pale as death but her turquoise eyes were shot with fury. Then she was hidden from his sight as her attacker freed her foot and drew her close, battling to still her struggles. Kerry closed in. His rifle barrel arced, smashed into the renegade's skull, crushing it. The man fell, carrying the girl down.

The second warrior gave Kerry no time to attend her. Loosing the frightened pony, he drew his knife with a breathy cough and attacked. Murder blazed in that wild, bony face with its aura of inky, unkempt hair. This faded to blank astonishment and the chill of death as Kerry shot him in the chest with his own gun.

While reloading, Kerry regarded the three still bodies. Two dead Navajos. A white girl in a faint. At the post, someone raised the alarm. Kerry roused, knelt beside the girl. She was unharmed, very lovely with her tawny hair framing the ivory oval of her face. Parted lips showed white teeth. Long dark lashes brushed her cheeks. Kerry had forgotten how beautiful a white girl could be.

Echoing bootsteps approaching at a run. Some man bawling: "Mercy! Mercy!" Desperately urgent, over and over: "Mercy!"

Kerry, obeying sudden impulse, laid the rifle across her body, placed one of girl's hands on the barrel, the other on the stock. Almost tenderly, he withdrew a hair pin, appropriating a ribbon bow, a silly little touch of her blue vanity in a waste of rabbit brush, sandstone and cactus, yet something strangely more important to him than food and security in that moment. One more moment he crouched over her, glaring toward the oncoming but still unseen partisan of the enemy post. Then he was gone, like a lizard, into the untracked coverts along Sage Creek.

* * *

From the post came a rush of men, whites and Navajos, to discover the girl in that place of death, to lift her from the earth and to marvel at the indisputable evidence of her fighting prowess.

"God!" said the stocky, heavy-jowled man called Machado. "Jose Coyote and Hosteen Key Zhinnie—dead! *Por la Madre de Cristo!* She 'ave keel two of my best mans. *Porque?*"

He stood planted, scratching his wild, black thatch, glaring at his slight, graying, well-groomed partner, Troy Applegate, who held the girl in his arms. The easterner cringed under the indicting scrutiny.

"She couldn't have killed them, Don Juan," he protested. "They must have attacked her; that's plain. And the gun must have gone off accidentally. I've raised Mercy to take care of herself, taught her to be a crack shot with a

pistol. But a rifle . . . why, she wouldn't know how to operate one."

"That rifle," Machado sneered, "ees belong to José Coyote. He ees dead, so she must take eet away from heem. Eet seems she know how to what-you-call operate eet, all right. Pancho!" He beckoned one of his partisans. "Deeg a hole and bury thees mans. See that all the *Indios* understand that the *buscadero diablo*—Kerry Gallard—he keel these mans. I punish the man who tells eet deefferent, *sabe?* Come now, we return to the post."

He led the way with an angry, stiff-legged stride, offering no help as Applegate staggered postward with his heavy burden. The easterner still protested the self-evident facts, even though it was without conviction. As he drew beyond the hiding Kerry's hearing, he was mumbling something about: ". . . and it is ridiculous to suppose this slip of a girl could take a rifle from those brutes and kill them both. If I'd foreseen anything like this, I'd never have. . . ."

Sounds drew away. A door slammed and quiet descended. Kerry settled down to wait, his whirling brain full of the girl called Mercy.

Darkness came slowly. Sheep straggled past Kerry's hiding place, bleating plaintively as they browsed leisurely toward their fold. Two Indian children and a few dogs followed behind. Kerry froze, clutching the knife he had taken from one of the dead Navajos. But the strong smell of sheep saved him, that and a breeze that blew from the animals toward him.

Lights winked on in the post. Along the scarp, piñon fires blazed up before the *hogans.* Still Kerry did not move. Hours later, when the Navajo fires had burned to coals and the Indians were asleep on their sheepskins, he rose, climbed to the hidden rifle and crept stealthily toward the post.

The night was moonless and the stars were partially obscured by clouds. Through a gusty wind that breathed of storm, he gained the big rock house known to the Navajos as *Tse Bahogan.* The air was heavy, humid, and the post windows were open to permit a welcome circulation. Pausing beside an aperture, Kerry listened. From somewhere inside came the mutter of voices, muted by closed doors. Kerry drew a breath and stepped across the sill.

In him was vast doubt as to his real purpose here. The presence of the girl had somehow softened the fibre of his original deadly purpose. His problem seemed now to have become hopelessly complicated, though he couldn't have explained why. Were not all these people his enemies? The meal he had taken from the Navajo saddles hadn't helped any either. To the extent it had imparted strength to his muscles, it had weakened his urgency.

GROPING through utter blackness for the door, Kerry found the dark, cruel-eyed face of Juan Machado swimming before his vision. And in his ears was that last injunction of Packsaddle Bill. "Keep yore hide whole an' git Machado if yuh kin." That, it seemed to him, was his first objective, his true responsibility—to end the black career of the renegade who had ruined them, whose way with the Navajos must surely compromise their probation and lead them to disaster. Retribution, food, horses, freedom to trade, these seemed very simple now to Kerry, with a good gun in his hand. But. . . .

He found the door, opened it slowly, silently. He stood for a few moments, staring out into a dimly lighted hallway, listening to the low murmur of man talk from another room. He was perfectly silhouetted now against that glow, a fatal fact as a low, vibrant voice behind him froze his blood.

"All right, Mister Thief! Drop the gun and lift your hands. My pistol is aiming at your heart and I never miss. Drop it or I'll fire!"

Strangely grim, that voice of Mercy Applegate, the girl he had last seen unconscious and lovely on the creek bank. Not the voice of one near to fainting now, surely. Not an iota of weakness or doubt in the tones. No fear. Just

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2¢ Fair Light
BATTERY B
4¢ Very Bright Light
4¢ Good Light
2¢ Fair Light

grim determination, unswerving purpose. Kerry thought of making a swift dash into the hall, vetoed it. A man cannot outrun a bullet. The hall would be a trap. He half turned, but the gloom hid her from his sight. Playing for time, he said, "Listen, ma'am. I'm no thief. I came here hoping for—"

"Drop that gun!" she snapped. "Drop it; you hear me? Even though you've earned it, don't make me kill you."

Disappointment, futility, chagrin, these rankled in Kerry as he accepted her inflexibility, let the rifle slip from his fingers and thud against the floor. The girl didn't make the mistake of approaching him then; she gave him no chance to overpower her. Her voice lifted sharply.

"Father! Mister Machado! Quick! I have a prowling thief!"

Momentary silence. Then their bootsoles were echoing against the flagstones as they came at a run. Hard hands were laid upon Kerry and he was divested of the knife. He was dragged into the well lighted living room, where Juan Machado strutted as he looked him up and down, gloating.

"*Nombre de Dios, señorita!* You know w'at you 'ave capture? I see you do not. No common thief, thees *diablo malo,* Kerry Gallard. He's worth wan thousan' pesos." His chuckle was ironic. "Your father he pay you, señorita. Tomorrow I 'ang Gallard for keeling José Coyote and Key Zhinnie. See, he has Zhinnie's knife, gon and *pinole* bag. And look! From hees pocket I take your hair ribbon. He ees conveected."

CHAPTER THREE

Beloved Enemy

MIXED emotions touched Mercy's beauty, changing it. She tore her eyes from Kerry, turned them to her father. Troy Applegate was grim. "Gallard, eh?" He glowered at Kerry. "A stiff price you'll pay for your fun, young man. There must be an example of those who would undercut our established business, raid our wagons and attack our men."

"Indian trade is free," Kerry countered. "We defended ourself against Machado's night attacks. Our wagon was looted and destroyed, its driver killed. As for these two dead Navajo renegades, Machado—"

"*Silencio!*" Machado thundered. "Where ees your old partner?"

"Like to know?" Kerry smiled. "You will, when he squares for this deal."

"Ho, ho!" Machado laughed. "I 'ope he tries while I 'ang you tomorrow."

"Father," Mercy cried, "you mustn't let Machado hang Gallard. I haven't told you how those Navajos seized me, fought me until I fainted. Gallard answered my scream and killed them. That's the way it must have been."

Her father sneered. "Then ran, making it seem you did it."

"Why not, father? He was hunted, dared not let his presence be suspected. He saved my life. The least you can do is to free him."

"To prey further upon us?" Applegate argued. "No. I'll guarantee him fair trial at Wingate of Defiance." His brow furrowed. "How can I ask anybody to believe our own Navajos attacked you, when I can't believe it?"

"You're too trusting," Kerry put in, "with a partner you don't know. Your money bred no gratitude in Machado, only greed. He put those Navajos up to taking Mercy, just as he put them up to ruining me. In time, you'd have paid ransom, presumably to *Dine-é Anaaii* but really to Machado. Then some accident would have befallen you and Mercy would have been forced to swap your estate for her safety, later killed by—"

"*Fullero!* Liar!" With a choked cry, Machado attacked, slugging. None too steady, Kerry went down under the blows, bounced up, ducked a swing and struck. Machado fell, bawling for help. Menials came from the store, swarming upon Kerry. He put two down before they bore him to the floor, battling. Jerked up and held tightly, he was rushed outside, with Machado fuming in the lead, and hurled into a stone springhouse used for perishables. A bar fell, locking him in moist darkness.

Inside the post, Applegate tried awkwardly to comfort weeping, bitterly protesting Mercy. The easterner was white-faced, shaken by Kerry's grisly indictment.

Desperately, Kerry attacked the sandstone and 'dobe walls. A tool would have worked quickly through, but he had none. His nails crumpled. His fingers wore raw. Finally he gave up, exhausted, bitter. Poor Packsaddle. Helplessly waiting, listening for a partner who would never return.

Kerry lay on the wet earth, and dozed. The soft rasp of the lifting bar woke him. He came up, wide awake, fists balled. Tomorrow, Machado had promised, but maybe he figured it safer to get it done while the Applegates slept. All his bold talk had won him and the Applegates, Kerry reflected grimly, was a losing. But if this was Machado coming for the hanging, he'd get a fight. A swift rush might cheat the noose, even if it meant another ordeal of hunted starvation. Kerry gathered himself.

The door creaked slowly open. A low warning. "Psssst! Gallard!"

Kerry gasped. "Mercy! You little fool! Machado'll kill you if he learns you are here. How'd you manage it?"

She came gliding to his side. "Machado's dead drunk. Here!" She pressed a bundle into his hands. "Brandy, bread, meat and my pistol.

You'll need them all—every last one!"

"Except the booze, lady. I'll dump it and use the bottle for water."

"Don't," she whispered. "Machado's renegades might free you for brandy. My horse is saddled and tied at the corral. Go quickly."

Kerry took the bundle from her hands, making no move to leave. The perfume of her hair was like wine in his nostrils, stirring strange boldness in him. "Why are you risking this, Mercy?"

Her head lowered. "I'm responsible. I couldn't stand having your blood on my conscience. You saved me. It's little enough to do in payment."

"Better if you did less," Kerry said drily. "When Machado finds me gone, it may cost your father his life and you—"

"I do not scare easily, Gallard."

"You're scared already, Mercy. You've talked with your father and you both feel trapped. Strangers to this vast country, you dare not try to escape. Machado's got you both unless—"

"Unless?" she whispered.

"Unless I kill him."

She gasped and her fingers found his arm. "No, not that. No matter how much he deserves it."

"Why not?"

"BECAUSE—" She hesitated, her breath quickening. "At a time like this, pride seems such a useless thing. When you faced Machado without weapons or hope, I was proud of you. When I learned you had taken the bow from my hair and knew you must have a feeling for me, something sweet and terrible happened to me. I hate to think that the man I love would kill another man in his sleep."

"Even if it meant safety for you and your father?"

"Perhaps not, if I believed it. Machado has too many men whose loyalty is bought with his money—my father's money. Even if you killed him, I doubt that we would get far from here."

"It wouldn't be easy," Kerry conceded. "Machado's riders are a desperate lot, wild youths who ran and hid to avoid banishment to *Tis Nas Bas,* who lived by raiding Hopi villages, Mexican settlements along the Puercos and white freighters. They are desperate enough to do anything. No, it won't be easy, but—"

"Not even for you, Kerry, unburdened by dad and I. With us, it would be impossible, but alone you can make it. Go quickly, while there are still hours of darkness ahead. We can face whatever there is here for us with a courage made stronger by seeing yours."

Terry drew her into his arms and found her lips. Her response was hungry, and for seconds they clung together.

Mercy buried her face on his chest and her choked words came to him. "Go quickly, my dear, before it is too late. Stay far, far from Machado and forget that you kissed me."

Kerry put her from him. "Who here can you trust? What Navajo?"

"Nadibah, the house servant. She hates the enemy Navajos, who killed her man because he preached following the white man's way. I have been kind to her and she is fond of me. Why?"

"The renegade spirit of the *Dine-é Anaaii* can be turned to our advantage if the right word is carried to them."

"What do you mean, Kerry?"

"Word that Machado has captured me, taken off the head bounty for which they are striving, and sent me to Wingate to bring the soldiers against them."

It seemed to depress her. "I guess," she said miserably, "that the only way to fight fire is with fire. Nadibah speaks no English. You'll have to explain it to her and that will take time. What do you think the enemy Navajos will do if they get that word?"

"Ride here on the fight, I hope, and kill Machado—the thing I could do now, without half the mess or trouble."

"I believe you're half savage," she said. "Machado has a glib tongue and a way with the Indians. Suppose he talks them out of it?"

"He might, but doubt of him will be planted. They'll not follow him as blindly as before. We'll have gained time enough, maybe, for me to carry food to my starving partner and return."

"Suppose they come and kill Machado," she asked. "Do you think they'll kill dad and me too?"

Kerry remained silent. She had voiced his own fear. When aroused, those *broncos* of the Navajo Nation were unpredictable. Once embarked on an orgy of vengeance, where was their blood-letting to stop? A pang hit Kerry. Had he found Mercy only to lose her to the savagery of the *Dine-é Anaaii?* I cannot live with myself, he thought, if I let Old Packsaddle down. And the odds are good I can make it back before the renegades get here.

"Take me to Nadibah," he said glumly.

Together they quit the springhouse, barring it behind them. They moved toward the drowsing black bulk of the post. Kerry filled and emptied his lungs, savoring the caress of the restless little breeze stirred by storm centers, where lightning played fitfully along the horizon. The miracle of food was apparent in him. Once again, his step was springy, his mental depression giving way to renewed confidence. Again he could believe in his luck.

Silently, Mercy let him into the store room, clutching him and clinging as the hoarse, passionate voice of Juan Machado echoed from

the bedroom, bawling for another bottle. "Wait here," Mercy whispered. "I'll bring Nadibah after she's served him."

She was gone then and Kerry was alone in a great room turned utterly silent save for the mice scampering among piles of sacked flour, potatoes and onions, over containers of coffee, lard and dried fruits. Saddles on the walls, raw sheepskins in a corner, baled blankets awaiting shipment.

The waiting seemed endless. Finally, the faint slow creak of a door warned Kerry, and Mercy came with her father, Nadibah behind them. Applegate fumbled for Kerry's hand. His voice was low and hoarse.

"Mercy tells me you have a plan, Gallard. Pray God it works. If it should; if you can save us, I'll see you well taken care of."

"Don't want to be taken care of," Kerry snapped.

"I respect your feelings, young man, but I realize now how much I owe you, just because I'm Machado's partner. You've lost your post and goods. Get us safely out and my share of Sage Springs Post is yours."

Kerry made no answer. If he could contrive their escape, his price would not be in goods and chattels. He wondered how generous this disillusioned little man would be, once his skin was secure.

In her own tongue, Kerry explained his plan to Nadibah. Her responses revealed fear of what renegade Navajos planned for the post. Pressing her for facts, he was startled to learn that renegade anger was growing against Machado. His arrogance had stirred rebellion. His promises had proven false. He had failed in his payments. According to Nadibah, Mercy's near abduction was a device to force Machado's hand. There was talk in the *hogans* that when his use for them was at an end, Machado would betray the *Dine-é Anaaii* to the soldiers. And because that was the word Kerry was asking her to bear, she reluctantly agreed.

"They will come for blood," she murmured. "They will kill *Hosteen Nakai Tso* and maybe any other *belagana* they find here. Take the young *asdzani* away. She is very kind. *Ayoi ooshni*, I love her. Now I go."

Farewell being a ceremony foreign to the Navajo, she touched their hands and was gone. The door creaked faintly. Soon she would be speeding the grim fiction to those barring the Wingate Trail, the last of the Navajo warriors. "Time's running out," Kerry sighed. "I'll have to be leaving now."

"God!" Applegate croaked. "Leave us alone? Wide open to attack?"

"Must be, Applegate. One might get where I'm going. Two or more would fail."

"What can we do?" the easterner moaned. "What if the renegades hit us?"

"With luck, I'll be here with you. If they come, fort up in the springhouse. I should be back long before Nadibah gets word to all those fellows. Watch and don't worry." He pressed Applegate's hand and turned to Mercy, who kissed him in the darkness.

"God speed you, Kerry."

Outside, he ran through shadows lest there be some undiscovered Machado watcher on guard. At the corral gate, he found a dead Navajo youth, blood welling from a stab wound in his throat. Nadibah had not failed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Where It Rained Frogs

RIDING through spotty rainstorms, where lightning crackled into the piñons and thunder bombarded the mesas, Kerry ran the renegade blockade, with food, firearms, a led pony and a prayer no harm had befallen old Packsaddle.

The sun caught him and the wet earth steamed and the creek at the foot of the talus boomed toward the Puerco with muddy fury. Tying his animals deep in a thicket, Kerry climbed to the mouth of the *anasazi* cave, ominously silent now, and loosed a low call: "Hey, Packsaddle! Wake up!"

Hollow echoes seemed to stir chill currents of panic in Kerry, sent him charging inside. In the gloom, the straight form under the ragged blanket, on the piñon-bough pallet, looked like death itself. But no, that rise and fall of the chest. . . . Kerry knelt, shaking a bony shoulder. "Packsaddle, come alive!"

Old Bill moaned, fought Kerry off with surprising strength. Then he cast off the nightmare, sat up blinking. He barked, "Wagh!" and joyfully flung a skinny arm about Kerry. "Cripes! Awful! Ben a-dreamin' Machado an' his devils was burnin' you, tuh l'arn whar I was hid. Musta ben them frawgs I et."

"Frogs?"

"Saved me from starvin', them critters. It rained millions of 'em here, big as oysters an' twice as sweet. I was crawlin' down fer more water when one jumped into my mouth. I chomped down, easy-like. Dee-licious! Musta et a thousand, without salt. It gimme so much stren'th, I clumb back here on my laigs. Ben a-sleepin' off a frawg jag." He yawned, stretched. "Boy, I feel prime . . . an' hongry. Le's collect another mess uh frawgs."

"No, thanks." Kerry grimaced. "I fetched bread, meat, *pinole*." He opened his bundle. "Have at it, feller."

Packsaddle attacked the food, halting presently to wipe his lips and heave a contented sigh. "Dee-licious, boy," he mumbled. "Now, if yuh'd fetched along a nip uh. . . ." He cut off as Kerry produced the flask Mercy had

given him. Packsaddle croaked, snatched and drained it and flung the empty container out onto the rocks. Then, with a raucous, "Wagh!" he pounced upon one of the rifles from the post armory, fingered the bag of cartridges slung from the stock, grinned. "Good gun, boy. Ain't got a good pony to go with it?"

"That too, Packsaddle."

"Cripes! Musta done good at Sage Springs. Notch yore gunstock, huh?"

"No notches, Packsaddle. Can't take time to tell the whole story 'cause I gotta get back. Applegate, Machado's angel, is there with his daughter. Machado's soberin' about now and he'll punish them for lettin' me escape. Word I sent out should fetch the *Dine-é Anaaii* roarin' to kill Machado. Somebody's gotta be there to see they use discretion."

"Fer cripes sake." Packsaddle looked abused. "Whyn't yuh say so. Shore must be a dee-licious female gal to make you fight fer Navajo Trading Company. But if she suits you, I'm in up to my ears. What we waitin' fer?"

* * *

Most of one long, hot day, Kerry and his partner sweltered in the rocks, watching Sage Springs Post. Food was gone. Thirst torment could not tempt them to venture out for the tantalizing water, a hundred feet below. The post seemed deserted. No ponies in the corral. No life about the scattered *hogans*. At *Tse Bahogan*, the store, doors and windows remained tightly closed. Nobody entered or left during those dragging hours, and Kerry worried. Had renegades come, done their deadly work and departed? Packsaddle thought not. "When them fellers hit, younker, they leave ruin behind. Quit frettin'. Come dark, we'll give a look-see."

Kerry couldn't reconcile that silence. No conflict had raged there. Was Machado still drunk? Had the Applegates tried escape? Where were the post Navajos? The sun set at long last and Packsaddle, seemingly drowsing, suddenly rose, nostrils flaring, keen eyes roving the butte-studded horizons. "Thought so," he grunted, leveling a gnarled trigger finger. "Looky! Yonder, comin' betwixt the Rabbit Ears!"

Kerry saw them at once, horsemen riding through the piñon gap, single file and by twos. *Dine-é Anaaii!* Painted war shields reflecting the afterglow. Rifles, conchas, hammered silver bridles glinting. Twenty, maybe a lot more, and a scant half mile away.

"Nadibah sure killed ponies," Kerry gritted, "or else she caught that outfit in council somewhere. We've got ten minutes, Packsaddle, to get in that post. If Machado is sober, he'll pink us like sitting ducks. Damn right, he will. . . ."

Packsaddle snorted. "My eyes ain't sharp as once," he said, "but good enough to pick out Machado leadin' them scamps."

"What? Well, I'm damned if he didn't talk his way out. No wonder it's quiet down there. Come on." He leaped down the talus, Packsaddle stumbling after him with a low-voiced warning.

"Steddy, younker. Machado likely left death behind them doors. It mayn't be too purty."

"No!" Kerry rebelled. "If he'd done that, why would he lead his renegades back here?"

"Why? An' why would he leave the trail open fer us to fetch the soldiers? Two reasons, son. Machado learned somehow about Nadibah's ride an' went to auger ag'in' it. That he done, but at a price. He ain't fetchin' 'em back; they're fetchin' him. They'll loot the post an' scatter, knowin' bluecoat trouble's overdue."

His logic lay like an icy weight against Kerry's heart as he hit the flat and sped through scattered growth. Packsaddle slogging behind, losing ground, plaintively begging, "Take it easy, feller. Rifles may be lookin' through them walls."

But Kerry had suffered too much to care. Thoughts of warm, yielding Mercy dead fired him recklessly. The post was a vantage from which he could drive lead into the heart of Navajoland's evil genius. Still, as he broke into the clearing before the gloomy stone post, he cringed at each step, expecting a gunflash, bullet agony.

NO GUNSHOT. No challenge. Only the silence of abandonment. The springhouse door swung open, swaying idly. Wildly, Kerry shouted, "Applegate! Mercy! Open up; it's Kerry Gallard!"

No answer. Kerry sprang up the stoop, thumbed the latch with his weight against the panel. Expecting resistance, he flew across the threshold and went down as the unlocked door gave. Packsaddle heaved in behind him, shut and bolted the door. "Looks like he cleaned house before he left, son."

"Looks so, partner." Kerry was up, rounding the counter. "Pile flour bags under the windows while I look. We've bought a fight, looks like."

In twin rooms set aside for Applegate and his daughter, Kerry found only topsy-turvy evidence of struggle. On the dining table were soiled dishes and uneaten food. The kitchen was untenanted. Kerry barred the rear door and moved toward Machado's room, Mercy's pistol leveled.

He saw the bodies as he crossed the threshold. Mercy and Troy Applegate! Certain they had been slain, Kerry roared an oath, checking it as he thought he saw a faint movement. He leaped to Mercy's side, knelt. It was gloomy,

with only a little light filtering through the high, small, barred window, but he could see joy in the weary eyes looking at him over the bandanna that held in her gag. She was cruelly bound, feet and hands lashed together behind, but so far as he could see there were no wounds.

His knife worked swiftly, but Mercy was too stiff to straighten, too numbed for speech. Gathering her into his arms, he carried her across the hallway to her room, put her in bed and drew a blanket over her. Then he went back for Troy Applegate.

Even more brutally lashed, Applegate was conscious but very dull. He was stiff and cold and if he had a pulse, Kerry couldn't find it. He forced brandy, from an open bottle on a stand, down the man's throat. As he picked the little man up, Kerry heard Packsaddle's call from the store. "They're here, younker. Watchin' from the timber like they was scairt. Better get out here."

"Coming right along," Kerry called. "The Applegates are here, but tied and in bad shape. I'll get 'em under blankets and—"

He lugged Troy Applegate into the hall, where there was almost a total absence of light.

He was moving toward the door of Applegate's room when he sensed rather than saw the shadow leaping forward. His hand swiveled. He had one terrifying glimpse of glittering pig eyes, thick brutal lips, straggly mustache and ugly flat nose. Juan Machado! The thing was impossible, yet it was so terribly true. Numb surprise and the burden in his arms made him helpless to avoid the trader's pistol barrel.

Kerry's first thought was that he must warn Packsaddle. It seemed to him that he bellowed: "Watch out, partner! Machado's inside!" But it was difficult to distinguish between the will and the act as the sky fell upon him. His brain blazed and seemed to explode. An agonizing weakness shot through him and he sank into blackness splashed with fiery streaks. . . .

Slowly, painfully, Kerry emerged from the shadows, plagued by nightmares of terror. Then consciousness came suddenly, with agony in his eyeballs, nausea tearing at his stomach. He lay on the hallway floor, a lamp burning beside him. The dull rays struck Mercy's oval face, pointing up the dark, haggard lines traced by the ordeal. But her lips smiled; her eyes were soft and her soothing fingers were on his forehead. As he awoke, she kissed him.

"It's all right, my dear," she murmured. "Packsaddle's holding him cooped in his room. Now if only father can—"

Kerry forced himself out of the fog and sat up, grasping her arm as the walls reeled dizzily. "The renegades!" he murmured. "They'll be coming at us as Machado did. How did he get in?"

A chuckle came from not too far away, and there sat Packsaddle, his rifle trained on Machado's door, smoke from his black briar twining about his craggy face, softening his wicked smile. "He come through a hole in the floor, at the end of the hall yonder. If them wild devils wanta foller him, one by one, let 'em come. It'll be like money from home, son, like free shots at a shootin' gallery."

"They won't try," Kerry said, "but they'll attack the front and get inside before we can stop 'em."

"Quit worryin'," Packsaddle laughed. "They're waitin' to hear from him. He's ben hollerin' his head off in Navajo, tellin' 'em to charge the place. But the winder in that room's small an' high up an' the walls is thick. They ain't got it . . . yet, an' Machado's growin' a mite hoarse. Light's failin' fast outside an' purty soon them boys is gonna start sweatin' over evil spirits an' crawl into a *hogan* some-'ers. With them off our minds, we can start thinkin' about smokin' Fat Juan out of his hole."

Kerry still had doubts, even though he knew Packsaddle understood the Navajo as well or better than any living white man. Besides, he was too sick and shaky to add anything to his partner's strategy. He got on his feet, leaning against the wall until the dizziness passed, took a drink from Packsaddle's bottle and felt better. After stirring around for a time, the shock of his head injury passed and he grinned at Mercy who watched him in tearful silence, caught up a rifle and went out into the store.

A look out the front showed him a deepening twilight. Shooting light was already gone. Beyond the brush line, where the *Dine-é Anaaii* had sat their ponies, details were shrouded in gloom. A hundred men might be hidden there, or there might be none. Even while he watched, night came down with a rush and, knowing Navajo superstition, Kerry was somehow comforted.

Returning to the hallway, Kerry found Packsaddle doggedly watching Machado's door, like a cat watches a rathole. The old fellow grinned, his mind patently at ease. Mercy was gone and when Kerry asked after her, Packsaddle jerked his head toward Troy Applegate's door. "Her old man's low, younker. Looks like he's gonna make a die of it. If I was thirty year younger, I'd know how to comfort the lady."

Kerry went in, found Mercy kneeling beside her father's bed. She had been weeping but she could still smile. "I can't rouse him, Kerry, and I think it's because he has no will to live. Machado abused him terribly when father resisted being tied up, but mostly I think it's shame. He's scrupulously honest by nature and I know he can't see any chance of living down what his faithless partner has done to

him. He just doesn't want to wake up."

"He'll make it," Kerry comforted, but his quick examination showed ugly bruises on Applegate's right side, and tight swelling under the rib line. Will to live had little or nothing to do with this. Machado had brutally booted his partner, probably rupturing his liver. Kerry thought, Applegate will be dead before morning.

Promising to watch over her father, Kerry persuaded Mercy to seek rest. The night dragged along, Packsaddle waiting for Machado, Kerry watching Applegate sink deeper into unconsciousness, Mercy alternately sobbing and dozing. Machado was silent.

The first break came just before dawn. Juan Machado began moving furniture in his room. "He's figgerin' tuh h'ist his yawp to that winder," Packsaddle opined. "We git it at daybreak, younker. Well, they'll know they ben in a fight." He tried Machado's door, found it barred. The turning knob drew the trader's fire. A bullet slivered the panel. Gun thunder ran through the post. Packsaddle grinned at the near miss. "Ringy critter, ain't he?"

Through the first gray streaks of dawn, Machado's voice struck heavily. "Now!" he bellowed, in Navajo. "Strike them, my brothers! I'll take them from behind. Everything here is yours except the white girl!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Three Against the Horde

MERCY heard Machado's roar, came into the hall in her stocking feet, pale but determined. Packsaddle patted her shoulder, handed her a rifle. "Keep Machado off our necks, gal. Me an' Kerry, we'll auger with the others." And, to Kerry: "No real danger from back until they start hammerin' down the back door. We'll hear that in time to answer it. Let's get into the store."

The wild, youthful *Dine-é Anaaii* were now accepting the leadership of the man they had been in revolt against short hours ago. The greater and more immediate lust had triumphed and, lacking other strong leadership, they looked to *Nakai Tso*. Scorning frontal attack, they came slipping along the rock building from the blind sides, hurling themselves onto the wide *portal*, some firing into the apertures as others fixed pole pries and ripped off the Mexican grillwork barring entry across the deep sills.

Kerry steeled his heart to what he had to do. Always an admirer of the Navajo people, deeply conscious of their complicated but sincere religious beliefs and never unsympathetic with their feelings of inequality that had led them to disaster, he felt deep regret at having to take the lives of those who had gone astray under the misguided leadership of men who knew no other way of reconciling differences except by force. He had hoped the *Dine-é Anaaii* would fall apart under the weight of cooling tempers and majority judgments. Now he knew that only death would satisfy them, and death he dealt out to them.

Steadily, his rifle spoke. At the far end of the store, Packsaddle's rifle took its lethal toll, never missing. That porch ran red with blood; renegades fell until the attack, stumbled and faltered on a floor of human flesh.

The assault broke before that cool, searing fire. The renegades withdrew and for some moments it seemed the danger might be over. But the respite was rooted in a lack of leadership rather than fear of dying. Lashed on by the orders of Machado, from his small, high window, they returned to their task with reckless abandon. And, with the grills down, their task was easier.

Kerry and Packsaddle simply could not fire fast enough. Their foes came swarming in and there was no time to reload. Kerry met the rush with swinging gun. A pistol flamed in his face, the bullet searing his neck. He crushed a skull and gave back. Battling fiercely, Packsaddle joined him. They retreated, taking a terrible price for each inch.

"Into the hall, younker!" Packsaddle gasped. "Fix tuh slam the damned door when I pop inside."

It offered the chance of a breather, but their foes were too close, too persistent, too flushed with a sense of victory. Packsaddle was almost hurled backward and Kerry was foiled as a big renegade got his leg in the opening. Bullets slivered the straining panel and both defenders knew the sting of lead. Again they gave back, the roar of gunfire and the sharp wolf-yelping of the renegades rising to a hellish crescendo. It was then that a new note was injected into the discord. The hall in which Kerry and Packsaddle battled was suddenly filled with the deep venom of Machado's bull voice, exhorting his wild partisans to new fury.

Kerry, desperately pressed, heard the blast of a gun followed by Mercy's shrill scream. Fear stabbed him and he dared a look and saw the big trader sweep the gun from the girl's grasp and pull her into his arms. He turned back, shattered his rifle stock against the head of a renegade. With Packsaddle's, "Git him, boy; I'll hold this end," ringing in his ears, Kerry spun about and leaped toward Machado.

The big .44 of *Nakai Tso* roared. The bullet scraped Kerry's ribs, half spinning him. Mercy's light pistol was in Kerry's hand, but he dared not fire. Machado was holding the girl before him, cursing her valiant efforts to break free and to distract his aim. Those efforts were puny against his great strength

but they did suffice to allow Kerry to close. He flung himself headlong in a low, flat dive. His shoulder struck Machado's thick legs, bringing him down. Then the three of them, Kerry, Machado and the girl, were battling on the floor.

LIFE and death hung in the balance. Packsaddle was desperately pressed, falling back. Machado, bawling Spanish oaths, tried to get his army revolver into Kerry's side. Mercy kicked his gun arm or he would have succeeded. Then Kerry had Machado's wrist locked. The gun blazed, the powder stinging his face and the bullet humming past his ear. Kerry got the gun turned, but he knew he could not hold it off, against the big trader's might, not for long.

Kerry had Mercy's gun and was sneaking it in toward Machado's belly, his chance repeatedly nullified as Machado rolled. Then Machado caught Kerry's gun arm and was forcing his own gun around for the finishing shot when Mercy sank her teeth in his left hand. Machado bellowed and his grip relaxed. It was Kerry's chance. He drove the shiny muzzled of the .38 into Machado's soft belly and pulled the trigger. The report was muffled. Machado groaned, relaxed and lay still.

Kerry bounced up, now he had two guns. And well that he had. Packsaddle was down on his knees, totally exhausted, his knife swinging as he blindly fought against that murderous tide. Kerry triggered both guns, savagely. The front wave of attackers wilted. It gave Kerry time to drag Packsaddle into Troy Applegate's room, Mercy helping him, and close and bar the door behind them.

There, for a minute, they could relax, Packsaddle sinking into a chair, closing his eyes. He was pale, drawn, worn out. Kerry, in not much better shape, sat on the edge of the bed where Applegate lay. Mercy took her father's hand, found it cold, laid it on his chest and drew the sheet up over his face. Her features remained calm; she did not weep. That menace beyond the barred door was too urgent for mourning.

Having found Machado, the renegade Navajos were sobered. Their yells stilled though the shuffle of their moccasins struck through the panel as they hurried about their looting. Something thudded against the door and Kerry started up as a faint crackling sounded. A wisp of smoke curled under the panel.

"They've fired the door to get at us!" said Kerry, looking up at small fortress windows, much too small to permit escape. "Win or lose, this will be the end of it."

"Let 'em come," Packsaddle grinned, opening his eyes and coming alive. "Them hellions drawed a losin' when they gimme five minutes rest. If that roof don't ketch fire, we're all right. We'll lick those damned, dirty sons yet!"

That was the fear they struggled with: fire in the roof timbers, a force proof against their courage. Kerry handed Mercy her pistol "Hug that front wall, honey, and be sure to save one shell."

She took the weapon, smiling at him with a courage that caught at his throat. "You're worrying about me, my dear. Don't. What is to be, will be, and it's all right so long as we're together."

They watched the heavy panel fume and warp, buckle and split. Then the flames were licking through and it was smoky and hard to breathe. Mercy pressed against the wall coughing a little. Kerry knelt behind the bed of hewn piñon, the big .44 trained on that burning door. Packsaddle stood, aroused and dangerous, behind a tall chest of drawers, the hammer of his rifle eared back. And so they watched the door crumble to char and ash. The waiting was hardest after they could see into the smoke-filled hallway, even though they knew the hot rock partitions held the renegades back.

The renegades were yelling again, steaming themselves up to attacking. Bullets lashed in from unseen points, thudding against the walls. There was no answering fire, and there would be none until there were targets. The yelling swelled and Kerry heard the shuffle of feet and brush of bodies against the partitions as they gathered for a final assault. He saw Packsaddle squint along his gun barrel. Kerry tensed, revolver leveled.

Then the yelling ceased, to be instantly taken up outside the store. The day echoed to a rising rataplan of gunfire and the drum of hoofbeats. There was a hasty, audible withdrawal of renegades from the hallway, yells of dismay from the storeroom. Gunplay swelled fiercely, maintained a few moments and died down to scattered shots. Packsaddle relaxed, his drawn face blank with astonishment. "Now what the hell's up, younker?"

"WE'VE got help," Kerry said, and hurried out to the store. The yard seemed full of horsemen, uniformed Navajos looking very military. Climbing the steps were two men: a rawboned, firm-jawed white man and a tall, grim Navajo. They entered, pausing at sight of Kerry, letting their eyes dwell on the scene of carnage. The white man heaved a sigh.

"Thank God, we're not too late. I'm Denis Riordan, the new agent at Defiance. This is Manuelito, head chief of the Navajo Nation and Chief of Indian Police. We were leaving for a campaign against the Ute horsethieves when Nadibah brought us word that the enemy Navajos were striking here. She thought we'd be too late, but—"

"In about five minutes you might have

been," Kerry said. "We're about fought out, and—"

"How many of you?"

"Two men and a girl."

"Whee-ew!" Riordan whistled. "Great work. You did a good part of our business for us. We've been going to call Machado on the carpet for some little time, but wanted further proof of the rumor that he was the real leader of the *Dine-é Anaaii.* I guess this disproves it—" He halted, his eyes suddenly going wide. "I assume he was defending this post of his."

"If he was, Riordan, he sure fooled me. He was leading the renegades."

"Where is he now?"

"Dead. After killing his partner, Troy Applegate, and abusing hell out of his daughter."

Riordan's brows lifted slowly. "Who are you?"

"Kerry Gallard. Machado burned me and Bill Meadows out nearly a month ago. We damn near starved to death trying to get down to Defiance, through Machado's blockade. We turned back here for food. Machado had lured his partner out here and was set to finish him and grab his wealth through the medium of his daughter."

The Navajo agent was thoughtful. "I heard whispers of your trouble," he said, finally, "but had too much to do to run it down. You can prove all that you've told me?"

"Every word. Wait, I'll get Meadows and Miss Applegate."

"Never mind, Gallard. I don't believe you'll have more trouble here. We're in a hurry to make the San Juan and straighten up that Ute business. I should be back in Defiance inside a couple of weeks." He scowled. "I suppose you know the new regulations regarding traders. You're not licensed and bonded, Gallard. You'll need to be if you continue trading. Come see me and bring your witnesses. See you then."

He spoke to the chief and together they went down the steps, mounted and led their police up the draw at a long gallop. Kerry turned to find Mercy in the doorway. "I heard," she said. "You did not tell him whether you were going to continue trading, Kerry?"

"How could I make a bond?" he asked, looking down at his shabby clothes and frowning a little.

She smiled. "I'll go your bond, my dear, but only if you abandon Chizhinbito. Father promised you his share of Sage Springs if you saved us. You and Packsaddle are the new traders here."

"And you, Mercy?"

She put her hand on his arm. "There must be somebody to enter into the bond with you, Kerry."

"Bond?" Kerry grinned. "You wouldn't mean matrimony, would you?"

"Whatever made you think of that?" she asked.

"A story I heard months ago. About the Franciscans building a mission school at Defiance. We'll have to go down there anyway, honey. How about it?" He looked long and deeply into her eyes.

Kerry had never seen anything as beautiful as the look she gave him. He took her in his arms again, whispered in her ear and kissed her. He had his answer in her response. Mercy would go that bond for him—for the rest of her life.

They went in to tell Packsaddle, found the old fighter stretched out on the bed. Beside him lay Troy Applegate, his cold lips smiling, as if in contentment. One man was sleeping the "long sleep." The other the happy "little death."

* * *

Navajo women still come to Sage Springs Post with their blankets and wool; Navajo smiths with hammered silver. The supplies for which they trade no longer come by mule or bull team from far Albuquerque, but by motor truck from nearby Gallup. Times, indeed, have changed.

Upon inquiry, you will be told the old stone store was the first trading post built on the reservation, which is close enough to the truth. You will learn that the founders were William Meadows and Kerry Gallard, and that goes unchallenged. For white men and Navajos alike have not forgotten such things as the old *hogan* store at *Chizhinbito* and such names as Juan Machado and *Dine-é Anaaii.*

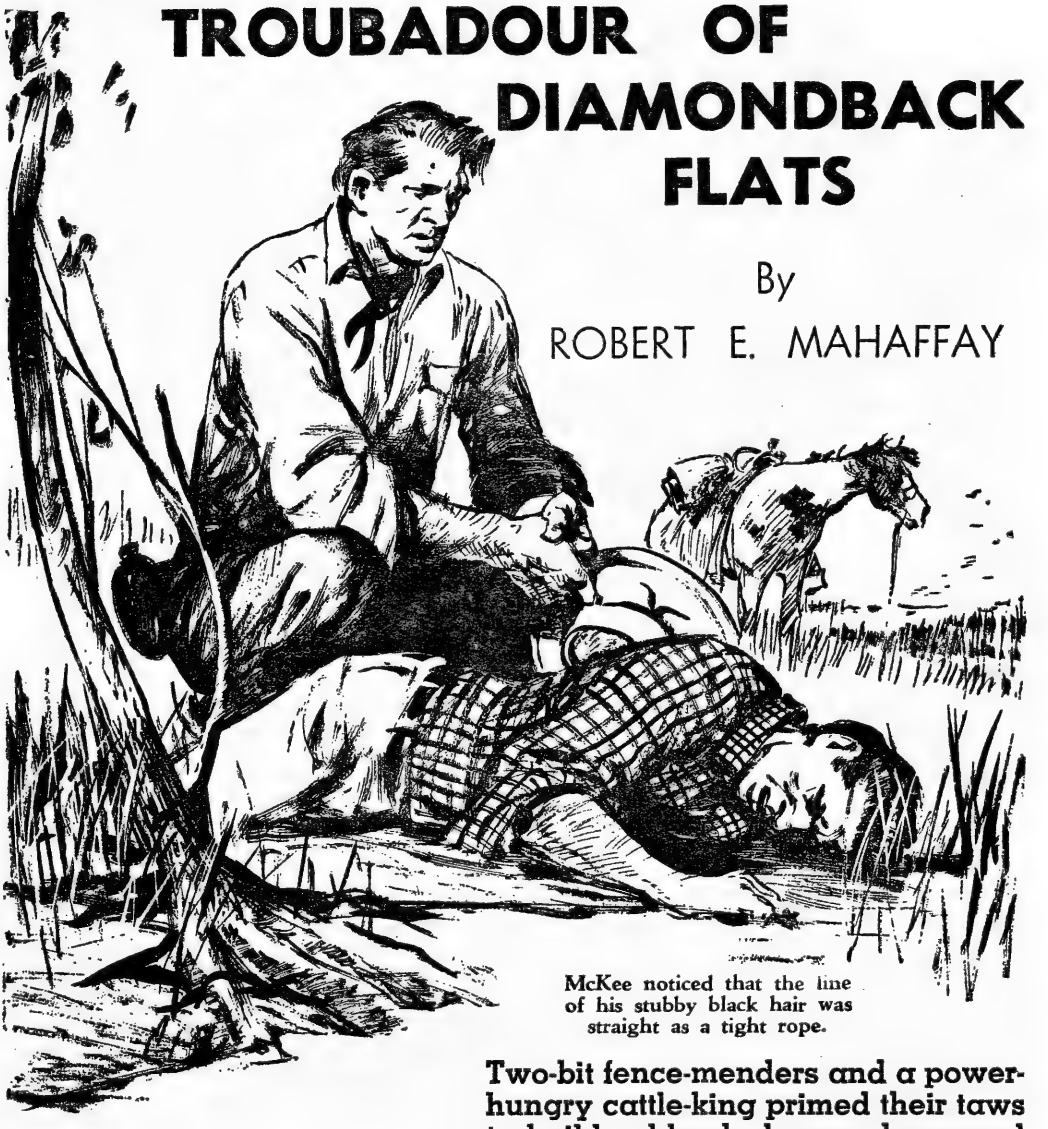
But old ones, whose sight is dim and who stay close to the *hogan* door, reach deep into their memories to keep alive the legend of Kerry Gallard, the beloved trader who became one with the Navajo, spurning the fortune he might have amassed, spending energy and substance and ambition throughout a long lifetime for the welfare of the scattered tribesmen.

Nor is Mercy Gallard one to be forgotten. She came to know the Navajo and to speak his language better perhaps than any *belagana.* She wrote of them and spoke for them in Washington. In every way she earned her share of the love they bore her husband, these nomads of a wildly beautiful land where war is known no more, where changes come slow, where the people live close to their god in industry and peace.

THE END

TROUBADOUR OF DIAMONDBACK FLATS

By ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY



McKee noticed that the line of his stubby black hair was straight as a tight rope.

Two-bit fence-menders and a power-hungry cattle-king primed their taws to build a bloody human boneyard at Diamondback Flats. . . . While a shoestring barroom troubadour—the only man who could stop the looming war—sang a terrible little tune, meant only for the ears of one man about to die!

JOHNNY McKEE had melody in his throat. When he sang, the sound had a quality that set something to stirring in people who heard it. His tunes pulled at their hearts, if he wanted it that way, or pulled at their smiles, if humor happened to be running through him.

He was leaning against the end of the bar, elbows hooked up on it, watching the flies as they tried to puzzle out the kerosene lamps overhead. He leaned easily on that bar.

His song wasn't anything anyone had written down. It rambled along, coming easily from his throat, telling about the troubles a nester had when his spring froze so far down he couldn't chop it free.

Old Carstairs, the barkeep, mopped down toward him, scouring at permanent discolorations.

Johnny McKee wasn't so tall anyone would

remark him. He had the tough, wiry sort of build that looks slender. His hair, the part that showed beneath the limp, pushed-back hat, was the reddish-yellow of sun-burned grass, curled tight against his forehead.

Carstairs' place was fairly full. This was spring, and the cattlemen were in, ordering supplies and lining up hands. The grubliners were drifting out of their range corners, and the little fellows from Diamondback Flats—McKee was one of them—had ridden in to try and balance their own enterprise against the temporary needs of such men as Ben Sorenson.

Sorenson owned the Boxed S, which extended from the Pinnacle Peaks to Whistling River. Many a little fellow had drawn Ben's wages while his own brand was rounded up, one to a hundred, with Boxed S beef.

Sorenson was a good rancher, but easy-going. Perhaps that was why he kept on Dud Roesch as ramrod.

Roesch came in through the swinging doors. His hat was gone. There was a purpling bruise along the left side of his jaw, and blood from his swollen nose put a lop-sided mustache on his upper lip. The hitting knuckles of his right hand were scraped raw.

Solid and broad-belted, he stamped past Johnny McKee, and the words or the tune put a cap on the anger brimming in his eyes.

He ripped out, "Quit that!" as he went by.

McKee obliged. He rattled the change in his pocket. There was precious little of it. Nobody from Diamondback Flats had much when the winter was done. He ordered a small beer.

Roesch ordered and drank, and ordered again. Johnny McKee got to watching the flies hustling busily around the lamp chimneys, and began to hum.

The humming got stronger, and he was singing again, not bothering anyone, just letting the words shape themselves and roll out.

Roesch set his glass down. He swung around. The next thing Johnny McKee knew, there was a sharp pain in his backbone, where it had slammed against the bar; his face was numb, and there was the trickle of warm blood on it; Roesch's fist was dropping away.

"I told you once to quit," Roesch said. "Now skip. Do it fast."

He had brushed back the flap of his coat from his holstered gun. His feet were spread a little.

"Somebody," he added, "has got to put a crimp in these nesters. They've got so high and mighty, straight talk don't make sense to 'em any more."

McKee stood quietly. Roesch's eyes were a muddy color between hazel and brown. A slow burning in them told that Roesch wasn't satisfied. He'd had a fight, but that wasn't enough. He wouldn't be satisfied until he had used the gun his hand was poised to pull.

McKee didn't say anything. There wasn't room for talk. He left what remained of his beer on the bar, and went out through the batwing doors, moving without hurry.

HE WENT along the walk until he came to the open space in front of Speece's wagon yard, and there he stopped at the horse trough, and lifted the lukewarm water to his bruised face in his cupped hand.

He was so busy with that he didn't see Julia Lonsdale until she was beside him, her breath coming in swift little gusts.

Julia Lonsdale liked Johnny McKee's voice, and maybe more than his voice. She thought some day the songs he made up, just singing, would amount to something.

To Johnny McKee she was everything, from the top place in the sky the sun touched to the middle of the earth.

"Johnny," she said.

He was pretty well straightened out, as to appearance, by that time.

"Spilled something or other on my shirt," he said. "Gave it a dash of water."

She stamped her foot. "Dud Roesch just about killed Ran Sherard."

He looked up. "What with?"

"They had a fight," she said. "Roesch was bigger. It was about the creek that cuts the corner between Ran's place and the Boxed S. Roesch told Ran he had to quit using it."

"How bad?" McKee asked.

"Nobody knows yet. He's over at Liverby's."

"All right," McKee said. He rubbed his hands on his shirt to dry them.

He fell into step beside her, wondering whether the sunlight was doing that to her coiled brown hair, or whether her hair was bringing a special luster out of the sunlight.

Julia Lonsdale was a clerk at Liverby's store. She had brown eyes so rich and big and warm it was hard to believe. Mornings, when the early trade had gone, she drew from a piano in Carstairs' place the melodies Johnny McKee had only in his throat and in his head.

The store was jammed. A tiny, mean little establishment, offering a general line of ranch equipment, it featured prices the men from Diamondback Flats were able to pay.

There were men in the bib overalls that spoke second-hand of a plow, and others in levis and jumper or old coat. They were restless, indecisive, crowding close but not too close to the first counter inside the door.

Someone had brushed the piles of hats off the counter. They lay crushed or tilted on their rims under the boots of nesters.

Ran Sherard wasn't killed, or near it. Stripped to the waist, he was sitting up on the

counter. His chest and his stubbly black hair glistened with the water that had been sluiced over him.

To Johnny McKee there was something prickly and awesome in the way he leaned forward, grasping his ankles with his hands, talking. His face and his torso showed clearly what Roesch had done to him.

"If we snivel and hide," Sherard said, "we'll never get an even break. Most of the cattlemen aren't against us. But so long as we let Roesch and a few others knock us down every time we poke our noses out of our holes, they figure we aren't worth doing anything about.

"They say the hell with us, same as they would about a guinea hen getting nailed by a coyote."

A few men nodded. One careful nester stooped and picked up a hat and began to smooth out the brim.

"The next thing is guns," Sherard said. "You all know that."

They knew it. Johnny McKee watched the faces. But they didn't like it. They didn't want it. Johnny McKee felt the quiet mental withdrawal of men who plan to duck down the first side road that offers.

Ran Sherard rubbed at the water trickling across his stumpy black brows. "You've got to meet a man with whatever he understands," Sherard said.

Sherard was honest, McKee thought, and he wasn't afraid. He was planning what he figured had to be done. Maybe there wasn't any other way out.

"If guns are the only thing a man respects, then it'll take guns to whip him," Sherard said.

The faces around the counter agreed that this was so, and reluctant, dogged purpose began to mingle with the urge to get away from trouble.

McKee began to hum, shaping a song with wistful verses about men who were driven to pick up guns, even though they were afraid of them.

The sound of McKee's humming got to Sherard. He jerked his head with quick irritation.

There was seldom a time men wouldn't stop to listen to Johnny McKee, but now an onlooker grumbled, "Shut up, Johnny."

Julia Lonsdale whispered his name with choked dismay. In her swift glance was dismal disappointment. She had expected help, not a foolish humming, and hadn't got it.

Johnny McKee felt angry suddenly, angry with her and with Ran Sherard and with whatever it was that had happened.

Sherard was talking again. McKee didn't want to hear any more of it. He eased back out of the crowd, eased through the door.

The late sun split the street in two with its shadows, making a ragged crack down the center. McKee angled across through the ruts to get into the shade.

He stepped up on the knotty planks of the walk, and the display window in front of him, behind its fly specks and grime and dust, held a collection of weapons. He stood there a moment, feeling a kind of wry disgust with himself, for it wasn't the shade he had wanted, but a look at this window.

A BELL jangled harshly as he pushed open the door. After a while a lean old man without a spear of hair on his head came out of the backroom workshop. Silver-rimmed spectacles, shoved up on his forehead, made him appear vaguely not human.

"I'll take a look at a gun," McKee said.

"Long gun, maybe?" the old man asked, quietly mocking. "Or one for your sleeve, or something to stick in your belt."

"Colt," McKee snapped. ".44. A used one will do."

The gunsmith tugged open a drawer. He lifted out three short guns and laid them on the counter. McKee hefted each one, testing the feel of the grips. He hadn't handled a gun in a long time, and the weight disturbed him.

"How much?" he asked.

"Thirty dollars for either of those. Twenty-eight for the end one."

Slowly McKee hauled a worn purse from a side pants pocket. He fumbled in it, smoothing out crumpled bills.

"I can give you eleven dollars now. The rest out of my first month's pay."

The old man picked up the guns carefully and stowed them away in the dresser and closed it.

"Son," he said, "the only way to sell a gun, specially just before a fight, is for cash."

The bell by the door rasped again. Ben Sorenson came heavily up to the counter. He was a big sober man with pale blue eyes that had a deceptively blank look.

He nodded at McKee and said, "Harry, I'll be needing a dozen boxes of .30-30 shells."

The gunsmith shuffled away to get them. Sorenson said, "You'll be coming out Monday, Johnny?"

McKee shrugged. "Why not?" For the past three years he had ridden with the Boxed S round-up wagon. The money he earned pulled his own little outfit through the winter.

Sorenson stood quietly, apparently not seeing anything or thinking about anything, then he said, "Tell 'em—" and McKee knew he meant the Diamondback Flats people—"that if they start a general fight, they're going to lose it.

"They can build up slow, and they'll win what they want without hurting anybody. There's still plenty of room in this country. If

there's a fight, it'll come because they start it, and they'll be askin' for what they get."

He lifted his shells and stacked the considerable load on his left forearm and walked heavily out of the shop.

"You still minded to buy a gun?" the storekeeper wanted to know.

"Not now," McKee said. He went on to the door, swore at the bell because it didn't sound the way a bell should, and along the walk. He had his dinner some time later, got a room at the hotel, and rolled in.

When he awoke, his unrest was gone, or nearly so. When he had shaved and breakfasted, it was time to meet Julia Lonsdale. It had become a ritual when he was here for him to be strolling past Liverby's and for her to come, and say, "I've got a few minutes, Johnny."

The sun was sharp and clean against a town from which sleep had washed all violence. A late rat scampered across the street, easing up when it came within jumping distance of the walk which was its refuge.

Johnny McKee felt smooth and warm. It was partly the thought of seeing Julia Lonsdale again. It was partly the tinkling of tunes in his head, and the words to link with them. The stories Johnny McKee had to tell were the stories of the work he did and the men he worked beside.

He told about the little things that happened to men with their foreheads rimmed with sweat. This morning something was wrong. He couldn't see it, but he felt it. It put a small dull ache deep in him, because he wanted to believe what Julia Lonsdale believed—that the time would come when his songs would be heard from one ocean to the other.

He wanted to sing about the things that had meaning for him—the way a horse's back bows when he goes up to shake off an unwanted rider, the way the sun hits slanting on a hill at dusk, the ballet-like dancing of a steer's forefeet as it tries to dodge a loop.

It came on him slowly that more important things were happening. And it wasn't long before he understood that Julia Lonsdale wasn't going to meet him. He remembered the look in her eyes before he had walked out of Liverby's store.

He moved over against the building front, put his shoulder blades against the sprung clapboards, cocked one heel up behind him.

HE SAW Del Pearson, the town marshal, come out of his office and stroll toward him with his loose-jointed gait. Pearson said, "Howdy, Johnny," and talked along for a bit about nothing in particular, and then said softly, "Not packing any iron, are you, Johnny?"

"I never have," McKee said.

"No-o, that's right, you never have," said Pearson. He didn't move objectionably, but he moved with a swift, certain understanding of his job.

He ran his hands under McKee's coat and up under his armpits, and had stepped back a pace, ready for a blow-up, in a matter of seconds.

"Just stripping the Flats folks," said McKee bitterly, "or the gunhawks from the big spreads too?"

"I'm doing the best I can to stop a fight," the marshal said. "Sometimes one of these things winds up with just one man getting shot, or maybe two—the two that ask for it. Sometimes they fan out and there's hell to pay, with a lot of fellers going gun-wild when there's no call for it."

Pearson went on and dropped out of sight around a corner.

Johnny McKee felt dried out, as if the sun were sucking every drop of moisture out of his body. He wished Julia Lonsdale were with him. He had a hungry longing for the sight of her brown eyes as she sat at the piano in Carstairs'. Things were simple and right when her fingers were flicking like white river foam over the yellow keys.

The boards of the building were unyielding against his back. This thing coming to a head wasn't a song to be hummed by a man who had nothing better to do. It was living and dying, and he couldn't match it.

The fall of a horse's hoofs came down along the street. Ran Sherard was riding out.

He was a big shape in the saddle. He didn't look to one side or the other, but drifted at a walk out of the north end of Whistling River and into the hills which divided the town from Diamondback Flats.

McKee waited for a time, then began to walk toward the livery stable. It wasn't an action dictated by thought; it was an impulse linked with the feeling that something important, something beyond him, was happening.

The stable was dim and warm. The stableman was in the harness room, hammering copper rivets into a bridle. Another man moved quietly, almost furtively, in the shadows of the interior.

McKee took a step or so to the side, out of the sunlight. Without making any stir about it, the man at the back led a bay horse out of its stall. There was a door at the rear, leading to the corral, and he opened that.

The light was against his cheek for a moment as he went through, and it showed Dud Roesch's lips and his nose, still puffed and angry from the fight.

Presently the stableman came out of the harness room and wheeled for the street with

the bridle in his hand. A warped, limping little man, he nodded at McKee.

"Haven't seen Roesch, have you?" McKee asked idly.

The barman shook his head. "Not this morning. He ain't come for his bronc, anyhow." He trotted up the street, hoping to pick up a drink when he submitted his repair job.

McKee went in the other direction, with another purpose.

Dud Roesch didn't come out on Whistling River's main street at all. And, at the edge of town, it was only because McKee knew where to look that he glimpsed Roesch's head and shoulders dropping into a draw that would take him into the hills Ran Sherard had entered.

For quite a while McKee squatted on his heels, tossing pebbles in his hand. He started to hum, but the tune wouldn't come.

McKee got up, wiped away the sweat running down from his sun-burned curls, headed for his horse. Unable to afford stable room, he had left it pastured on the edge of town. It took him an hour of impatient stalking to get a rope on the animal.

The sun was well up before he reached the hills, riding for the corner of Diamondback Flats which jutted against Boxed S range.

He picked up one set of fresh tracks—Ran Sherard's, he judged—but saw no other. Sherard appeared to be making for the broken gullies on the far skirt of the hills. Out of them meandered the creek which had started the fight.

It was past noon, and the sun had turned smoky hot, when Johnny McKee found him. The thick air or the folding gullies had muffled the sound of shooting. Ran Sherard lay on his side, one hand stretched out and trailing in the creek.

Two tiny perforations in the cloth of the black-and-white checkered shirt across his shoulder blades showed where the bullets had struck.

Johnny McKee scooped up water in his hat and splashed it against Sherard's fight-scarred face, but it wasn't any use. It wouldn't have been any use thirty seconds after the first shot.

Hunkered down beside the dead man, McKee's knees began to ache. He didn't move.

HE SUPPOSED what he ought to do was circle the spot, find the point from which the bullets had come, pick up the trail of the gunman, and carry the word into town. That would be the best thing, and no one could quarrel with him for doing it.

The aching in his knees got sharper, and then the nerves went numb. Sherard's hat had rolled away, and McKee noticed that the line of his stubby black hair was straight as a tight rope across his forehead.

Johnny McKee was remembering the look of dogged purpose which had filtered into the faces of the Flats men as they listened to Sherard in Liverby's store. This killing was all it would take to drive them to an explosion.

And beyond that memory was the memory of Sorenson's blue eyes as he said, "If they start a general fight, they're going to lose it."

Sorenson was right. A dozen boxes of .30-30 shells balanced against a second-hand sixgun was about the balance of the two forces.

Johnny McKee said softly, "But not me. It doesn't have to be me."

He wasn't a fighting man, and he wasn't a man built for big things. He wanted his songs—and Julia Lonsdale—nothing else.

Senselessly, McKee had a moment of bitter anger for Del Pearson. He could feel Pearson's practiced hands sliding over him for weapons.

Pearson had no chips in this. He could afford to point out coolly that the lives of one or two men were being wagered against the lives of many. The end to this could come swiftly, or it could string out into all the brutal grimness of range war.

It didn't have to be Johnny McKee who ended it, or tried to. It wasn't his game. He told himself that with a furious kind of desperation.

He wanted his songs and a chance to sing them. They were his life. He didn't want to die in front of Dud Roesch's guns. There was no chance at all that he could stop what had been set rolling.

He put the palms of his hands against his knees and straightened, standing there trembling until circulation was restored in his legs. He climbed into the saddle without looking back at Ran Sherard.

* * *

It was late afternoon and the heat lay packed in the town of Whistling River when McKee rode into it again. McKee seemed to have grown leaner. Around his mouth dust was caked in grooves that hadn't been there before.

He put up his horse at the rail in front of Carstairs', and went tramping along the walk. Sorenson's buckboard was pulled in there; in the back was a lump, under a tarp, which McKee guessed was the .30-30 shells.

Stopping at Speece's trough, McKee very carefully rubbed away the grime of the ride, ran wet fingers through his reddish-yellow hair. His eyes were very bright.

He went along to Liverby's, moved inside. For a moment or two the interior was dusky with shadow. Julia Lonsdale was measuring

cloth from a bolt of rose-colored calico, snipping it with shears, tearing across the width.

Johnny McKee stood against the counter. He looked at the hollow of her throat, not her eyes.

"You were always telling me I ought to be singing some place else—not here," he said.

He saw the ivory hollow move as she swallowed.

"I could use some money," he said. "Whatever you can spare. Until I have a chance to pay it back."

The girl didn't say anything, but he could feel her scorn. He waited, knowing she couldn't refuse, because she once had believed in his songs.

She still said nothing at all. He couldn't hear her breathing; she was as motionless as if there were no life in her. Then she moved away, and McKee didn't hear the sound of her shoes against the floor.

After a time she was back, laying a thin little sheaf of bills beside his hand. He picked them up, helplessly aware his hand was shaking, crammed them into a pocket.

"Thanks," he said. "I won't forget, Julia."

She didn't speak, and McKee stumbled out of the store into the sunlight. He drew his breath in with a great sob. He kept moving because he didn't trust himself to stop and think.

He made the same angling cut across the street. The window with the weapons in it was a blur. The bell had the same strident jangle. . . .

The hairless gunsmith balanced the .44 gently on the palm of his hand. "It'll make you a good gun," he said. "I guarantee that. . . ."

THERE was a medium crowd in Carstairs'. It was like a thousand other crowds on a thousand other days, and the easy-going normality of it put a lump in Johnny McKee's throat.

The talk was a steady hum, spiked here and there with a laugh or an oath and the random clicking, like distant rifle fire, of empty glasses being thumped on the bar.

A languid poker game was in progress, ringed with indifferent watchers. Old Carstairs, stolid but watchful as a cat in the open, moved behind the bar with so little effort his two hundred forty pounds seemed graceful.

There was a chance, McKee was thinking, he had forgotten about. So thin a chance that Julia Lonsdale wouldn't have let him take it, but a chance. He hadn't thought there was even that when he had ridden away from Sherard's body, knowing what he had to do.

He counted four men from the Flats. The rest were cattlemen and riders. Ben Sorenson was half way down the bar, blue eyes steady and calm. Dud Roesch was three places nearer. He growled an order at Carstairs and Carstairs left the bottle in front of him.

McKee hooked one elbow on the end of the bar. Smoke from dangling cigarettes was thickening in the room, but faces were abnormally sharp and clear to his eye.

Then the dingy walls and the hanging lamps with their puzzled swarms of flies and the stained mirror faded out. Johnny McKee was seeing a tiny creek, splashing between rocks, and a man lying beside it. He could see the two holes in the back of his shirt. Johnny

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15¢ THE COWBOYS MAGAZINE Ace-High WESTERN STORIES

McKee began to him, softly and slowly.

"The kid's here," someone murmured.

The humming turned into words, low-pitched but strong enough to carry. This was to be a song, he told them, about death. A hard dying, quick and evil.

The tune built up, haunting and slow, vibrating through the room. One of the poker players tossed in his cards and tilted back to listen.

Johnny McKee told about two men fighting with their fists in a dusty rutted street. Not so much of a fight, really, but one man walked away from it carrying in his heart a plan to kill.

At the far end of the bar a man began to talk. His neighbor growled, "Lay off." Old Carstairs shuffled with no more noise than a shadow. Dud Roesch was hunched over his glass, gripping it with his raw-knuckled right hand.

The tale of the song swung to the stable—one man riding out in the daylight along the main street; the other lurking in the dimness, slipping away with his horse, going from alley to alley out of town.

The song carried them into the hills—one man riding the trail; the other avoiding it but keeping pace, fading from coulee to coulee, taking the cover of bluff or brush or slope.

Everyone in the place was listening now. Johnny McKee's wiry body was loose and relaxed against the bar. His hat was shoved back on his reddish-yellow curls. In the tune of his song was something somber and something that probed a man's heart and something that bit like a whiplash.

Dud Roesch's head was up, and he was staring. His muddy brown-and-hazel eyes showed disbelief.

Johnny McKee had been through his own time of fear, and was wrung dry of it. The song poured on without a halt. At that moment, it was the life and the core of Johnny McKee. There was nothing else.

He painted the picture by the creek for them. The boiling sun that set the air to smoldering above the misshapen rocks. The gray sagebrush on the hill slopes, motionless in the heat. The twisting creek, whispering woefully against its banks.

One man stepping down from the saddle, forearming the sweat from his face, kneeling to drink.

The other man above him, crawling on his belly among the boulders, pushing a rifle ahead of him. Crawling and stopping, legs spread out in a V.

The rifle pressed against a dust-stained cheek, its barrel resting on a stone. Eyes squinting. The bead of the front sight settling into the notch of the rear. And beyond it the black-and-white checkered shirt stretched tight across a broad back.

"Shut up, damn you!"

DUD ROESCH'S face was lumpy and dis colored, and there was fury and fear i his muddy eyes. He had whirled savagel away from the bar toward McKee.

The song wasn't done. It flowed from John ny McKee's throat without a break—the ston of two bullets snicking down at a slant, strik ing so close together they puffed up dust i the same black square.

Roesch shouted again, but the viciousness o his anger tangled his words, and they came out meaningless.

There was nothing meaningless, though about the hand whipping under his coat, jerk ing at the gun there.

Johnny McKee was slower. So much slow er someone groaned. He wasn't a fighter, bu death was close to him, and he reached de liberately for the .44 under his belt.

Roesch's fingers tore at his weapon, slipped tore again. It was a slip which cost his life McKee's slower gun came level. The clamor of his shot slapped the walls and the ceiling and filled the whole room with ringing sound.

Roesch leaned forward until he was off bal ance. He continued to fall, and the gun skit tered out of his raw-knuckled hand.

"Split knuckles turned his fingers stiff on him," a man murmured in an awestruck voice, "Made him fumble his draw."

McKee shrugged, feeling great emptiness.

"Roesch killed Ran Sherard about noon to day," he said. "Up by Boxed S Creek. Shot him twice in the back."

Ben Sorenson knelt deliberately by the man on the floor, and then straightened. His voice was steady. "Son, you could be lying."

"Part of it I saw. Part of it I guessed," said McKee. "Roesch thought I saw it all."

"I reckon he did," said Sorenson gently. "I reckon he did." He turned his blue, careful eyes over the banked crowd. "Somebody go fetch Del Pearson. He'll want to get the straight of what happened here."

Sorenson gave his big shoulders a shake. "So far as the Boxed S is concerned, this thing started with Roesch and it's ended with him. Anybody see it different?"

No one said anything for a moment or two, and then everyone was talking at once.

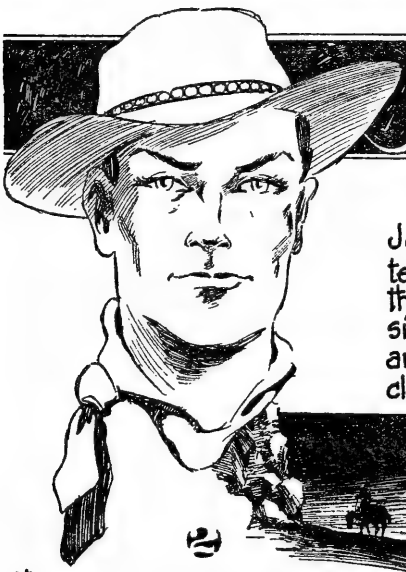
The emptiness yawned deeper in Johnny McKee, taking his strength with it. Only after what seemed an endless time was he able to blurt, "Some of us—got to go up after Ran."

But he was thinking beyond Ran Sherard to a girl who hadn't been able to say goodby to him because she was crying.

FRONTIERSMEN WHO MADE HISTORY

from the notebook of CEDRIC·W·WINDAS

JEFF MILTON



Jefferson D. Milton was only a kid of seventeen when he donned the white sombrero of the Texas Rangers. But he handled the man-sized job of trailing three of the worst killers and cattle-rustlers who ever disturbed the Border, clear up to Socorro, New Mexico.

The murderous trio, followed by Jeff, disappeared into the wastelands which border the Rio Grande near Socorro. Coyotes yelped replete thanks to the moon for a desert tragedy.... and the kid rode back alone. His report to headquarters was laconic, "Them hombres won't never murder nobody else."

Badman Brown, with four vicious partners, decided in 1889 to relieve the Southern Pacific train of its bullion freight near the tiny town of Fairbank, Arizona. Jeff decided otherwise. Although the renegades held women in front of them as shields, Jeff cut the outlaws down to the last man.

Jeff served with distinction as a Customs officer, United States marshal, and gun-guard for Wells Fargo. Later, so well did he carry out hazardous duties for the Immigration Service, that a United States naval vessel was named for him, the JEFFERSON D. MILTON. A fitting honor for a fighting frontiersman.

TENSLEEP-GUNSMOKE GALAHAD!

HOW me, rawboned Tensleep Maxon, develops that muscle ain't the story, but the results is, so I'll sketch it brief. I'd dabbled in horses down Kaycee way—skip the details—an' tolled a serious young deputy sheriff on my tail. He chases me antigodlin' across Johnson, Natrona an' Fremont Counties, runnin' Zebra off at the legs an' blisterin' my saddle.

East of Riverton, I choose the Beaver Trail to'rds Sweetwater, quit it to cut over to Popo Agie an' hug the waterline north through Wind River Canyon into Thermopolis for rest an' repairs. More'n usual stove up, I'm draggin' to'rds the bathhouse for a hot mud when I see the sign before the big white house. It pictures a wampoodlin' gent flexin' knotted muscles fit to bust his skin, an' says:

All on account of a sign, Tensleep Maxon learned how to bust horseshoes and knot spikes until he could lick his weight in wildcats. But Tensleep didn't know that, when the chips were down, he must fight an ornery, ring-tailed, free-for-all champion—with a cheap board coffin as the prize!

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DOUBLE STRENGTH IN 30 DAYS
MAGICAL MUSCULAR DEVELOPMENT
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A bath an' massage, thinks I, an' sound the knocker. The prof himself answers, muscled plenty, neither giant nor runt. He looks me up an' down, scowlin'. I grin. "Hi yuh, Cold Deck. My mistake. I thought a bath an' massage might be honest."

"Tensleep, boy!" He relaxes, offerin' his paw. "Come in!" He clamps my fingers, jerks me inside. His pit-black eyes are reachin' for the particular trespass to fit my case. He kicks the door shut, spins me, whips me about like a pillow. Cripes! I'm helpless!

Now he's got me against the wall, chokin' me with my lapels. "Come clean," he hisses. "Why you doggin' me? I'll kill you before I let you tip my applecart. Talk fast, feller!"

If ever I'm lip convincin', it's now. Cold Deck Garson's bad—once the crookedest tinhorn playin' the N. P. an' the Missouri River packets. Killin' where his bad deals backfire, he's wanted by more sheriffs than me. My denials satisfy him. He busts out a bottle, growin' confidential. This is his hideaway since saloon gambles got too hot. Havin' finished a mail-order strength course, he's opened here an' is prosperin' honest. He sells me his course an' a safe hideout. I buy punishment an' complications. Times sure as hell have changed.

Those first weeks I think I'll die, fear I won't. But at least my mind's easy. Zebra's on graze with Mike Stone, a Wild Bunch relay man near the Honeycombs. The law is huntin' me from Shoshoni to Greybull, never thinkin' to probe Ajax Samson's torture chambers. Slowly, I toughen up, puttin' on muscle to resist Cold Deck's maulin'. Imagine. Only exercise he once recognized was flippin' sleeve cards an' a derringer. Times shore change.

In a month my soreness is gone an' I'm makin' Cold Deck sweat. In two, I'm rock hard, my arms, legs, neck an' shoulders bulgy. I'm throwin' him occasional now, bustin' horseshoes, knottin' spikes an' liftin' twice my weight. I feel new health an' power. Cold Deck's course is no swindle. He sure enough seems reformed.

But one day he turns bleak. "My past overtakes me, Tensleep. No peace for the wicked. I'm closin' an' driftin'. You better do likewise. I've enjoyed your company. Hope you profit from your new physique."

That night we shake hands an' part company, me hatin' to bust our rugged friendship but glad to hit the saddle, now that the manhunt's cooled. He heads north, leavin' expensive equipment for paid students to fight over. Me, I ride to Mike Stone's cabin, find him entertainin' Ol' Bannock Spender—an original Old Reliable with Butch and the Kid, Long Henry, Sundance, Merino and other wild spirits that defied fear an' distance as they wrote a red page of lawless history in our western country.

I'm draggin' to'rds the bathhouse for a hot mud when I see the sign.

By
BART CASSIDY

LIKE the rest of the scattered remnant that hungers for old shadows, Bannock's tickled to see me. But his joy's tempered by trouble. We hit Mike's jug an' presently Bannock busts down. After long kickin' around, he's landed the foremanship of the Triple X horse spread, out of Embar on the Upper Owl. He's saddled with a bunkhouse bunch that's hell on alleged ramrods. They've busted three an' Bannock fears the worst.

" 'Tain't the beatin' I'm scairt to take," he explains, "though they bust a man up somethin' turrible. It's that young gal."

"Gals cause half the world's troubles," I quip. "You in love again, Bannock?"

"Quit that!" he scowls. "I'm a bachelor an' know a good thing, but Lamar Gard was my friend. The world was lonelier when he died last spring. Coralee taken over with true Gard spunk an' she can't lose if she can git rid of them hoodlums."

"You once waved a convincin' gun, Bannock. Losin' your touch?"

"Done lost 'er, son. I've kept 'em offa my neck an' fired 'em repeated. All I git's a laugh. They're fast draw an' bad. One day they'll plow me under an' Coralee will be under Logan Gage's thumb. Or Darnell Darnell's, which is worse."

Answerin' curiosity, he explains that Gage leads the bunkhouse rebels. Darnell owns the adjoinin' double J, or will when he pays in more mazuma. Gage, he says, hopes, by smashin' foremen, to git himself appointed. Darnell hopes to marry Triple X.

Bannock airs his troubles till me an' Mike doze on him. He's still goin' strong next mornin' at breakfast, an' afterwards when him an' me hit for Embar, me headed anywhere the climate's healthy for my skin. Before we cover the thirty mile to Embar, I'm sick of Triple X characters, an' Bannock too. Gage, it seems, has led the boys on a carousal, in Embar. Bannock swears he's gettin' 'em on the job, firin' 'em if they refuse, resignin' 'em if they won't be fired. I never heard the likes of that before. My hooraw makes him orrey-eyed.

About midafternoon we hit Embar, at the crossing of the Lander-Billings an' Gros Ventre Trails. It's small stuff except for four big saloons. Bannock's jaw sets as he spots his crew's ponies tied before the Gateway Saloon. "I'm takin' to them devils if it costs me busted bones, Tensleep."

"Easy, feller." I shake his hand. "Might be smart to resign first."

"Like hell." He reins to the rack, glowerin'. Chucklin' over a man makin' a mountain out of a gopher hole, I tie Zebra an' enter the Washakie Cafe. I'm cuttin' my first bite of steak when yells sheer along the street, an' angry man roars. I bust out the door. Yonder's Bannock reelin' back across the boardwalk, his face spurtin' blood.

He tumbles off the walk an' is trying to git off his back when a big gent with wild inky hair leaps onto him with spurred heels, h'ists him an' slams him across a hitchpole. The bar slivers. Bannock flops into the dust and manure. He's still now an' I'm bellerin' mad as that big bull jerks Bannock up an' tumbles him into the horse trough, head first.

Merry guffaws lift from the grouped punchers at the saloon door, laughter that dies as I fish Bannock out, tip water outa him an' then advance on the barrel-chested waddy who's rejoined his mates. "Nice goin', hog-bristles," I tell him. "You beat that old man up artistic. Half your size an' old as your father, too. Neat work."

A cowboy vents a belly laugh. "He talkin' to you, Phineas?"

Phineas' brows beetle. He breathes fire. "How's it yore business, fork-bill?"

"I wonder," drawls I. "It's confusin' where my business commences an' another's ends. Bannock's my friend."

"Oh!" Phineas smirks at a bunkhouse dude. "Bannock's friend, Logan. Same ol' treatment?"

"The same," grins Logan Gage, more the pansy type than I'd expected. Phineas looks far tougher an' the rest ain't exactly lilies of the valley.

"Trouble with you, Phin," I drawl, "you're too big fer your britches. You can handle a man if he's old an' stove-up enough, but. . . ."

"But not a big, strong fella like you, eh?" chortles Phineas, an' makes a pass at me. I brush it off an' lift my right smashingly to his thick lips, bringin' blood. He takes it like a rock, bellers an' piles into me. A hooking left wrings a grunt from him, halts him. Slow movin', slower thinkin' an' likin' it inside, I dance around him, upsettin' his balance, thankin' my stars for Ajax P. Samson. My pistonin' fists, loaded with new power, double Phin, straighten him, double him again. He stumbles in, pawin' awkward. I stagger him with a steamin' uppercut.

A cowboy swarms over me from the side. I backhand him, knock him off the walk, stiff. Gage is cussin' 'em back, demandin' Phineas finish me. But Phin ain't in condition. He's heavin' like a quarter horse, reelin' like a drunk. But he keeps shufflin' ahead, game as hell. A blisterin' haymaker makes his knees sag. His fists paw more feeble. I crush through his puny guard, drivin' my right to his Adam's apple. He falls, shakin' the walk.

I DUST off my hands, turnin' to Gage, eager. From four feet off, he's glarin' at me, murderous, hand on his gun, astonishment holdin' him rooted. I decide against tellin' him off. My full-arm swing finds his jaw, slams him against the front. He slides down, senseless. An' when I turn to face the rest, they're gone —into the saloon. Townsmen are rushin' to'rds me, a tinbadge leadin'. "What's wrong here," he hollers.

"Nothin' worth mentionin', Sheriff," I answer, calm. "Mail order badman beat up Old Bannock Spender. But when they chose me, they fizzled." I gather up Bannock an' head for the medico's sign, downstreet.

Behind me, the deputy sheriff sighs: "I swan to goodness. Never thought I'd live to see the day that. . . ."

Bannock comes to while the doctor's patchin' him. He grins crooked. "You done warned me, son. I never should uh dared Big Phin tuh peel his bark. Tell Coralee my best fell a batch short, fer her to hire a fightin' man. An' look after her, son, till I git around an' organized, will yuh?"

When I promise, he allows she's stayin' at the Wind River House. I poke over an' read the register's last entry. "C. Gard, Rm. 7." I rattle back an' knock. The gal that opens takes my breath. Wavy red hair, piled high. Cheek bloom not out of a bottle. Rosy lips fer kissin'. Lithe figger covered but not hid by the flowered dress.

"Yes?" It's music an' she's smilin', but there's a defensive glitter in her eyes.

"Bannock sent me, ma'am."

"Bannock . . . he's back? Did he hire a crew at Thermopolis? Where is he?"

"He's back, but not fit to call, ma'am. He didn't hire no men. Right now he's bein' doctored for playful bunkhouse bruises. He says you better hire a fighter."

She chills. "Those men! What will I do? Maybe I'd better hire Gage?"

"Better wait, ma'am. He's out of order."

"What do you mean?"

"I put you short a tophand, lady. Temporary anyway."

She eyes me, studious. "Who are you?"

"Bicep Jones, ma'am. An old friend of Bannock's."

"How old a friend?"

"Since I was a button." Then, getting brash: "Can't I fill that job, ma'am?" I'm thinkin' how mebby I can touch a beautiful gal's affections, marry a horse ranch an' settle down. Crazy, ain't it? There oughta be a law against dreamin'.

Light touches her face. "You're hired. Name you own wage if you straighen things out. Get my team from the stable, pick up Bannock and call here for me."

In a pink fog, I leave her an' angle across the street to'rds the stable. From beyond the entrance, I hear: "Harness the Gard broncs, hostler. A lady's shy a foreman and I'm squirring her home."

"Not today, brother." I stride into the stable. A big, flashy man pivots, gawkin', ears laid back, hackles roached.

"Who might you be to say so?" he asks.

"Bicep Jones, strong boy of the Montana Joneses an' new foreman of Triple X. Should I know you?" Conscience answers "yes." He's awful familiar but I can't place him. Maybe it's his clothes, maybe his overfed fleshiness.

"You will know me, if you're telling the truth," he sneers, addin' quick, "If you know anything after Gage's boys finish messin' you up. I'm Darnell Darnell, Double J iron. Dime-a-dozen foremen can't handle Triple X hands, so-o-o, I'm puttin' them right an' liftin' a load from the little lady's lovely shoulders. If you're really her new foreman, I'll respect her judgment. But never forget I'm hangin' around the edges."

"Where the buzzards roost," I blat, detestin' him. "Don't move in, Darnell. I hate a buzzard's smell."

Speckled eyes glitter. He settles, fingers curlin' over his belted .45. I grin. "An' don't bow your neck at me, thataway." I grab an' jerk, lift him shoulder an' crotch an' carry him to the entrance. I heave an' he does a spiral, all whirlin' arms an' legs an' sprawls in the dust. Slowly, painfully, he stirs an' comes up. I'm standin' there ready to draw. He shrugs.

"I'll remember to make you pay for that," he mutters an' drags himself away, limpin'. I lift my eyes to the hotel front. There in the window, Coralee's watchin' me. It looks like she's grinnin', but at that distance. . . .

I TIE Coralee's team to the hitchbar an' Zebra to the tailgate. Then I go over to the doctor's for Bannock. He ain't there. All the doctor knows is that the old gent paid an' left with his bandages. I go on a still hunt through the saloons. As I come out of the last one without findin' hide nor hair of Bannock, I notice that Zebra's at the rack again, the buckboard gone. I hurry up there, feelin' guilty.

"Darnell beat yore time, cowboy," the snaggle-toothed hostler calls over to me. "He druv her home an' the way he looked I'd make myself skeerce if'n I was you."

Mad all through, I lead Zebra over an' put him on the oats. Then I go lookin' for Bannock again. I comb the town. He ain't in Embar an' nobody seen him leave. I'm disgusted an' tempted to head out. Thoughts of Bannock an' pictures of Coralee racin' through my mind hold me stubborn. I'm takin' that job in spite uh hell. How can that gal stand that slimy Darnell Darnell?

After supper, I get directions to the Triple X from a bartender, pick up Zebra an' ride for the Triple X. Thinkin' confused thoughts about Bannock an' Gage an' the rebels in the bunkhouse. Hell on foremen, eh? Why? To get Gage the job? Why, again? Mebby he'd let 'em loaf the days away, at Coralee's expense. Or most mebbyso they're all into some skullduggery they don't want no outsider keepin' cases on. That last idea hits me hard enough so that I take time out in the dusk to do a little gun practice, straight drawin' an' shootin', Texas-roll, outlaw shift, buscadero spin an' other tricks learned over the years an' all but forgotten. If I'm right, Gage will make a play at me, assumin' Darnell ain't talked Coralee out of hirin' me. I'll be ready. . . .

The big red moon's up an' Coralee's settin' on the honeysuckle-shaded porch when I rode in. She calls to me an' I take the chair she offers. "I didn't know where you'd gone, Mister Jones, and I was anxious to get home. I'm sorry."

"Am I still foreman?"

"Of course. I—"

"Good. Is Bannock here?"

"No-o-o, I don't think so. You said he was being—"

"Doctored, yes'm. He got away. Shame, too, he's the only loyal man you had. If Gage an' his hell-raisers have made off with him, I'm due to bloody up your spread a little."

"Oh, I don't think that. They've never harmed any of the others, once they got them off the job. Deputy Sheriff Sam Aldrich says I'm foolish not to appoint Gage and get the trouble over. Darnell says the same thing. He's not very complimentary about you; I can guess why."

"Yes'm," I murmur, writhin' a little under her musical little laugh. I still can't get Bannock off my mind. I can't think of a thing to do about it. Coralee gets up.

"I've had a worrisome day," she confesses. "I'm going to bed. You'll take over the foreman's house, yonder. And you better get some sleep. Tomorrow we'll go over the tallies so you can have a working knowledge of Triple X. You'll need it when you meet with the cowmen on that Pool matter."

"Pool?"

"I'm being asked to join a pool. Triple X, Darnell's Double J. Pete Harrison's Rafter H, Cal Tatum's Tepee and Elvira Bullet's Anchor B. It's supposed to cut operational expense and expedite gathering and marketing of cattle."

"But you're a horse ranch, ma'am."

"Cattle, too, Jones. I run a couple of thousand head, but figure to cut that way down."

"Then you won't want to join the pool?"

She suddenly looks terrible grim. "I'm afraid to, afraid not to. You see, Jones, my dad was a hard man who put success first. He made plenty of enemies. Among the worst were Pete Harrison, Cal Tatum and Jonathan Bullet—Elvira's husband, now dead. I should mention Jack Jarham too. He sold his Double J to Darnell, thank goodness."

"You mean these outfits are pressurin' you into the Pool, ma'am?" I ask.

"It amounts to that. It's an old story. Over the years, we've had more or less active warfare. Plenty of blood has been spilled and each outfit hired its share of professional killers. Cattle and horses were stolen. Drives were broken up. Men were ambushed. Herd money was intercepted and stolen. Dad was no saint, Jones, and he liked the going rough. I don't. You'll represent me at the Pool meeting, listen to the deal and use your judgment."

"Cripes," I mutter. "That's an order. Suppose I don't judge right?"

Coralee smiles faintly. "That's the chance I must take. I rather imagine the choice will make little difference to Triple X. If I join, I will be outvoted and at their mercy. If I don't, it will mean stepped-up trouble—war. Either way will be ruinous, seein' that Gage and the men—"

"I get it, ma'am. First, they've got to go. After that . . . well, I'll do the best I can for you."

I leave her an' I'm studyin' as I corral Zebra an' move slowly to'rds the foreman's shack. My talk with her has cleared up a lot of questions. Gage is plainly workin' for the Pool outfits, against Coralee. An', while it's easy to see she trusts him, Darnell's likely in on it too. It looks like a lot of odds against Triple X an' me. Whee-ew! Looks like every time I get sentimental, I pay—through the nose.

I REACH the shack an' I'm about to enter when the beat of hoofs stops me. I stand there, hidden in shadow, as a dozen riders sweep into the yard an' haul up at the house. Thinkin' it may be Gage up to some devilment, I draw my cutter an' drift back to'rds the house, huggin' the gloom. I hear somebody callin' for Coralee an' when she comes to the porch, the voice says: "Sam Aldrich, ma'am. Where's Gage and the boys?"

"Aren't they in town, Sheriff?"

"They left about dark. Soon after, I got the word I bin waitin' for. I've been watchin' your trouble with Gage this long time, hopin' he'd overplay his hand an' give me something more'n general hell-raisin' here to get my teeth into. I've got it now. Last night, somebody killed Gilly Ponder an' his boy, on the little Rafter P. They buried the two nesters in the crick sand an' I'd never have knowed mebby if an old Mex saddle repair man hadn't been camped in the willows and seen it all. He fetched the word. Only man he recognized was Gage, though I've got the description of others. How about that foreman of yours, ma'am? Trust him?"

"I trust him, Sheriff Aldrich."

"Hope you're right. If Gage shows, send the new man down to advise me. Gotta nab Gage before he lets more blood. Mebbe I can ketch him at Darnell's. Something popping on this range an' I'd advise you to get into town an' put up at the hotel till I can find what it is an' scotch it."

She vetoes the suggestion, remarkin' that she's more'n passable good with a gun an' promisin' to be careful. The sheriff an' his posse rides away. I go into the foreman's house, shut the door an' strike a match, lookin' for the light. Shadows lunge at me from three sides. I drop the match an' reach for my smokepole. Something bounces off my head an' my brain explodes. I hit the floor, my senses flickerin' on an' off in the most confusin' way. I hear somebody—sounds like Phineas—say, "Cut his damned throat, Logan, an' le's git goin'."

"Shut up!" Gage raps. "I know what I'm doing. Time enough to kill him later if he proves worthless in a trade. You heard Aldrich. It's my neck that's threatened. Get a rope onto him, an' tie him so he can't get loose. Then we'll light out for the meeting. We'll be late as it is."

I'm conscious of pain as they hitch a lariat about my wrists an' ankles, drawin' 'em together up the back. Then they're carryin' me an' I can feel the cool night air on my face. They dump me somewhere an' I smell dust as they nudge me against a wall. Somebody laughs. "They'll never think to look for him here, Logan."

"Hit your saddles," Gage raps. "We gotta kill horses if we make Meeyero before the meetin' breaks up. Get goin'."

They pull out an' I pass out an' presently I'm awake, nursin' a headache an' the torment of ropes pulled so tight the circulation's cut off. Enough hours of this an' I'll get gangrene. I try the knots. No use. I try to make a noise through the gag they've tied over my lips. Likewise no use. Where am I? Way that feller spoke, I'm where nobody's apt to find me, mebby for a long time. Especially if the

sheriff gets Gage. Even knowin' it'll mean murder, I find myself hopin' the sheriff misses his man.

A sound stiffens me. Soft slither of a boot sole. Creak of a door. The faint rhythm of breath comin' an' goin'. I go to gruntin', all the sound I can make. A whisper: "That you, Tensleep? Where you at?" It's Bannock, an' I'm glad—for him an' for me.

My grunts draw him to me, where I'm rolled far under a bunk, in the bunkhouse. He rolls me out, cuts me loose an' helps me rub some blood into my starved arms an' legs, hands an' feet. "Lucky you found me, Bannock. How'd you do it?"

He chokes an' spits an', as a moon ray ketches him, I see both his eyes is blacked, his lips puffed up, his nose droolin' blood. "They laid fer me when I went fer my hawss," he says, sorta quivery. "An' they really worked me over. They throwed me into the crick an' I come out of it, got a gun from the hostler an' rid here to shoot it out with them devils. I come sneakin' up here when I seen 'em tote you out to the bunkhouse. An' I heard 'em talkin'—"

"Yeah?"

"They're killin' ranch owners, one by one, Tensleep, an' takin' over the irons. Only reason they haven't did away with Coralee is because that Darnell feller wants her. They're havin' a meetin' somewheres tonight to thrash it out. I gather they aim to see that what Darnell gits is a ounce uh lead in the guts."

My mind is racin'. Puttin' what he says with what Gage told his mates, it adds up to one of the most murderous steals the range ever knowed. How they're going to secure their titles, I can't figger. Mebby drag the thing along through the courts, with the law havin' no witnesses an' the renegades enjoyin' the income from big ranches, mebby for years.

"Listen, Bannock," I say, thoughtful. "They're meetin' on the Meeyero. Got any idea where?"

He rubs his swole head gingerly. "I think I do," he says. "Beyond the pass, mebbyso five mile beyond the Needles, they's a small outfit belongin' to a feller name uh Jordan, Oliver Jordan—a one-time preacher an' a fine man. He's runnin' polled Angus, not many but the best blood. They'd likely brush him out of the way, then command a range from the Graybull to the Reservation line, all the way from Wind River to the Shoshones—a grazin' empire twice as big as Delaware. We better git up there, son, an' give Jordan a lift."

"It would have to be out of a grave," I say, moody. "Listen! I'll ride up yonder an' look them over. You see if you can intercept Sheriff Aldrich. He's over at Darnell's lookin' for Gage. If you can locate him, fetch him to the Meeyero. I have an idea certain gents are wakin' from dreams of empire to worse nightmares."

"That or decent folks will fill gunshot graves, son. Sure I'll find Same. Here. . . ." He sticks his borrowed gun in my empty holster. "You may need this worse than me. See you at the big powder burnin'." He cripples away to'rds the crick, where he's got his pony tied. I hurry to the corral for Zebra.

A TALLOW dip, stuck in a beer bottle, lights the Jordan cabin. From the deep shade of a hackberry in the yard, I peer through the open door at the five men settin' around the table, castin' occasional glances at the score or more gunriders kneelin' over a lantern-lit blanket an' a three-card monte game, at the barn.

At that table, Gage an' Phineas set close together, uncomfortable. There's slab-built, heavy-whiskered Pete Harrison an' ratty, starved-lookin' Cal Tatum—chinless an' Chink complected. The fifth man's back is to'rds me an' when he turns to light a cigarette, I gasp. It's Prof. Ajax P. Samson—Cold Deck Garson!

Gage consults his watch, nervous. "Where's Darnell? Damned if I'll humor that fancy pants; come on, Phin."

"Sit down." Cold Deck's voice crackles. "You bought chips, Gage. You're playin' the hand out. A quitter threatens us all. I'll kill the man who welches. We'll give Darnell an hour, then assume he's wise an' go huntin' him. Sentiment is fatal. That Gard woman must die."

Gage sets, his face workin'. "I don't like it. Killin' women will set the range against us. Bad enough that you murdered the Widder Bullet, but Coralee—"

"She's gotta go, Gage. How bad don't you like it?"

Gage shrugs, lowerin' his face.

Harrison growls, "Steddy! Here's Darnell!"

It ain't Darnell; it's me. I pause at the threshold, grinnin' cold. "Howdy!"

They jerk up, Cold Deck spinnin' with fingers taloned. "Maxon! What the hell?"

"Maxon?" gasps Gage. "That's Jones—our new ramrod. I—I tied him up."

"I see," Cold Deck sneers. Then, to me: "What you want, Tensleep?"

"Want?" I laugh. "Ain't this a Pool meetin'? I'm reppin' for Triple X, votin' with Gage an' Phin against woman killin'."

"What give you that Pool meetin' idea, Tensleep?" Cold Deck hums it.

"Cripes!" I yelp. "Did I misunderstand Gage?"

"He's lyin'!" Gage screams. "I told him

nothin' of the sort. He's a damn liar!" Gage's face is white.

"He musta dreamed it," Cold Deck sneers. "You're just in time, Tensleep, to help bury Darnell with the gal he loves. How?" His dark eyes are writhin'.

"Me?" I smirk. "When did a wolf ever run with a coyote pack?"

"You mean you're fightin' us, Tensleep?" Cold Deck's hand drops. Behind him eight merciless eyes burn into me. I straighten, thumbs hooked in my gunbelt.

"Fightin' you, you murderin' buzzards, killin' you if I can!"

I jerk my cutter, fadin' from the doorway as five guns blare. Out they surge after me, fair targets against the glow. I throw myself down, triggerin' from my back. Pete Harrison stumbles down, mortally struck. Tatum screams, whirls, plunges into the dust. Phineas doubles, coughs an' falls across Tatum. Gage hurtles the threshold, sprintin' through the moonlight. I fetch him down with my fourth shot.

I shift, missin' as Cold Deck drives a slug past my ear an' lands atop me. His teeth find my wrist. I lose the gun. He discards his, reachin' for my throat. "I'm killin' you with my hands, you illegitimate," he croaks, his eyes blazin'.

Now it's teacher an' pupil. I jab his eyes, force his head back, liftin' him on my flexin' knees. He slugs me in the face. Jackknifin' legs send him sailin'. He lands like a ball, bouncin' up, chargin'. On my feet, I back, maulin' his face. We grapple, strainin', testin' one another. Once, not too long ago, his terrible strength would have discouraged me. But not now, thanks to him. I too have something, an' I turn it on, wonderin' what he's thinkin' as he counters power he developed. It's one hell of a deal for him.

He tries to rassle me down. I twist him off balance, clinch, heave him up. He's fightin' savage, breath screamin' from his lungs as he shreds my face. His blows, damned painful, can be endured. If he'd hung close, he'd have been a harder nut to crack. He'd have beaten hell out of me.

I try a push-up, twistin' him face to the sky, catchin' him in my hands an' blastin' him against the cabin wall. The building shudders an' I hear bones crackin'. Then he's up again, roarin' at me. But he's left some of his strength at that wall, an' condition's tellin'. I smash his face without stoppin' him. Again we're tied together, scufflin'. I bust his hold, lift him high. He screams as I dash him to the ground, head first. This time bones do crack—neck bones. He shudders, then lays still.

I fill my lungs, straighten. Yells come from the barn, the pound of boots. Men race to'rds me, through moon fog. I ketch up Bannock's six-shooter, light out for Zebra Hawss. Behind me, somebody hollers. "There he goes, runnin'! Look laid out yonder—the boys, dead! Stop leggin', you!" then there was some more tellin'.

A gun bellers. Then they're all shootin' like crazy. Bullets drone around me. I crack a sixth cap, slowin' 'em. Careless footed, I trip an' tumble, drag myself up, groanin' with a wrenched knee. *Hell,* thinks I, *I go through gunplay untouched an' a dropped stick uh stovewood brings me down. This sure is a hell of a note.*

I'm on my knees, reloadin', figgerin' to go out shootin'. Then the night suddenly fills with yells, hoofbeats, the roar an' snarl uh guns. Men gallop from the crick timber, shootin' as they come. Renegades halt, take one look, then turn an' scamper for their ponies. Sheriff Aldrich is bellerin' to his men to head them, capture them all or cut them down. Over everything, Bannock's high wolf yips lift, as they done when he rode with Butch and the Bunch.

I don't watch it. Limpin, I crawfish painful to Zebra. The critter whickers friendly, humps his back to show he's full of run, an' rearin'. I untie him, mount. Gunfire's peterin' to scattered shots, dyin' altogether. I hear Aldrich holler.

"Who's layin' there, Bannock? Your friend, Jones, amongst 'em?" Sheriff Aldrich sounds kind of excited.

"Not him," brags Bannock, joyful. "Harrison an' Tatum, Gage an' Phin an' some stranger. All dead."

"Where's Jones, then? Scatter after him, boys. Darnell, who's really Pinnell—an abscondin' banker from Malta, allows Jones is Tensleep Maxon—wanted horsethief in two states."

"A lie!" Bannock screams. "In twenty year, I've never knowed Jones to steal a pony." Bannock goes on, making me out to be a saint to the good sheriff.

"Bless you, Bannock," I breathe, an' lope Zebra down the draw. As confused sounds drop behind, I'm thinkin' of money I lost in a Malta bank, years ago, an' a high-toned banker I slugged for not fightin' to keep his bank open after the Big Die. Now Pinnell's turnin' State's evidence against his mates, an' spillin' his guts about me. He's the type. A damn dirty type.

Anyhow, Bannock can now rod Triple X, hire a new crew an' watch over Coralee. An' me—well, I can drift on, coolin' my ardor while my new-found power seeps away. Man afraid of his strength, that's me. Git along, Zebra.

HANDCUFF AND HANGKNOT

By J. CARROLL

IN THE Old West expert gunmanship didn't always mean that a lawman would bring in his man. There were outlaws who could shoot, too, and who were quick on the draw and deadly in aim. To capture such a desperado required more than mere gun-quickness. It called for a mixture of daring and resourcefulness rather than the immediate use of six-shooters.

A meeting of this kind occurred in Oklahoma in the early 1880s. John Stilwell, long familiar with the wild, sparsely inhabited territory that served as a welcome hideout for all manner of lawless men, was serving as a Deputy U. S. Marshal when word came in that Mexican Joe, gun-quick and conscienceless cattle rustler, had killed two deputies in the Chickasaw Nation. Stilwell got his orders.

Stilwell had never met the desperado face to face, but he knew from stories he'd heard that the outlaw was one of the deadliest gunmen loose in the Indian Nation. Stilwell holstered two ivory-handled .45s, his favorites with which he downed thirty-one lawbreakers and captured seventeen others.

Once in the wilderness, Stilwell began his relentless manhunt, careful however to let no one approach him unseen. One day word came to him that Mexican Joe, upon learning Stilwell was on his trail, had sworn to kill him on sight.

After a week had passed uneventfully, John stopped at an abandoned cabin on a desolate stretch of the Chisholm Trail. The sun had set, dusk was falling. He started a fire in the cookstove and began a meal.

From the trail came the sound of hoofs. Stilwell gazed through the darkness and saw a heavily-armed rider reining toward the cabin. Two Colt .45s hung from the newcomer's gun-belt. A saddle boot showed a businesslike Winchester. As the figure dismounted, keeping a steady, cold eye on the lawman, Stilwell recognized him as Joe.

Stilwell spoke calmly. "That's a lot of artillery to be traveling with, stranger."

"Yeah," the rustler answered. "I'm lookin' fer a deputy marshal name of Stilwell."

Stilwell breathed easier that the outlaw didn't recognize him. Not that he feared the man, but because he wanted to take him alive, if possible.

Mexican Joe was hungry and readily accepted Stilwell's invitation to eat. After the meal both men lay down to sleep under the same blanket. Both men wore their guns, and Stilwell could tell by the outlaw's easy breathing that he was sleeping lightly.

Stilwell could have slipped out his gun and killed the man, but the code of the six-shooter frowned upon such action. And any gunplay in such close quarters might mean the death of both men. That was no good.

As the night wore on, the lawman devised a dangerous plan. Gradually he grew restless, turning and tossing, jostling the outlaw at his side. Mexican Joe would grunt and curl up each time he felt the lawman's crowding body. Then Stilwell rolled slowly but completely over the rustler and after a few moments rolled back.

Mexican Joe came awake with a vicous leap and cursed terribly. But too late. Stilwell had handcuffed his man effectively. With the first roll over the gunman, Stilwell cautiously clamped the handcuff on one hand, and while rolling back snared the other; thus capturing the dangerous outlaw without even having to fire a shot.

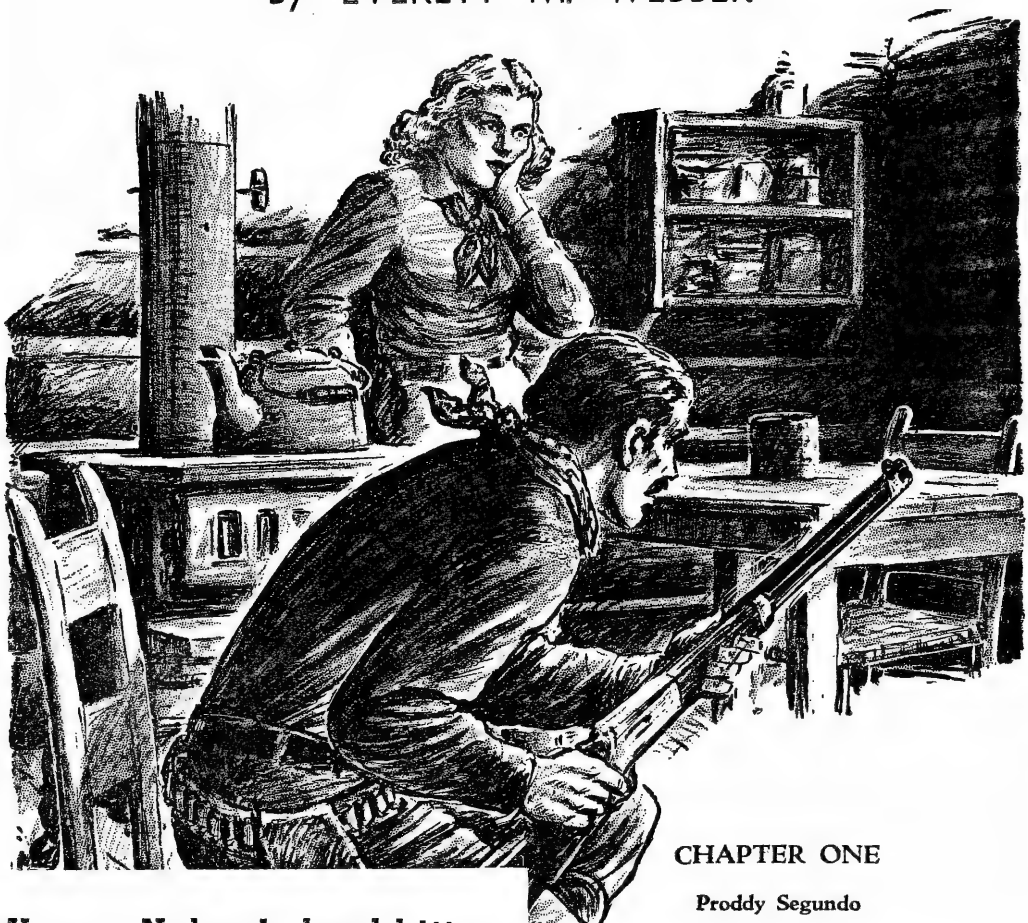
Back in civilization once more, Stilwell told how he'd worked the capture. His friends laughed in disbelief, but the sulky prisoner verified the story, swearing that Stilwell was "trickier than a cat."

Mexican Joe was taken to Fort Smith, Arkansas, convicted in the famed Judge Parker's court, and hanged for his crimes

SECRET OF SHE-DEVIL

A Smashing Novel of the Cattle-Country

By EVERETT M. WEBBER



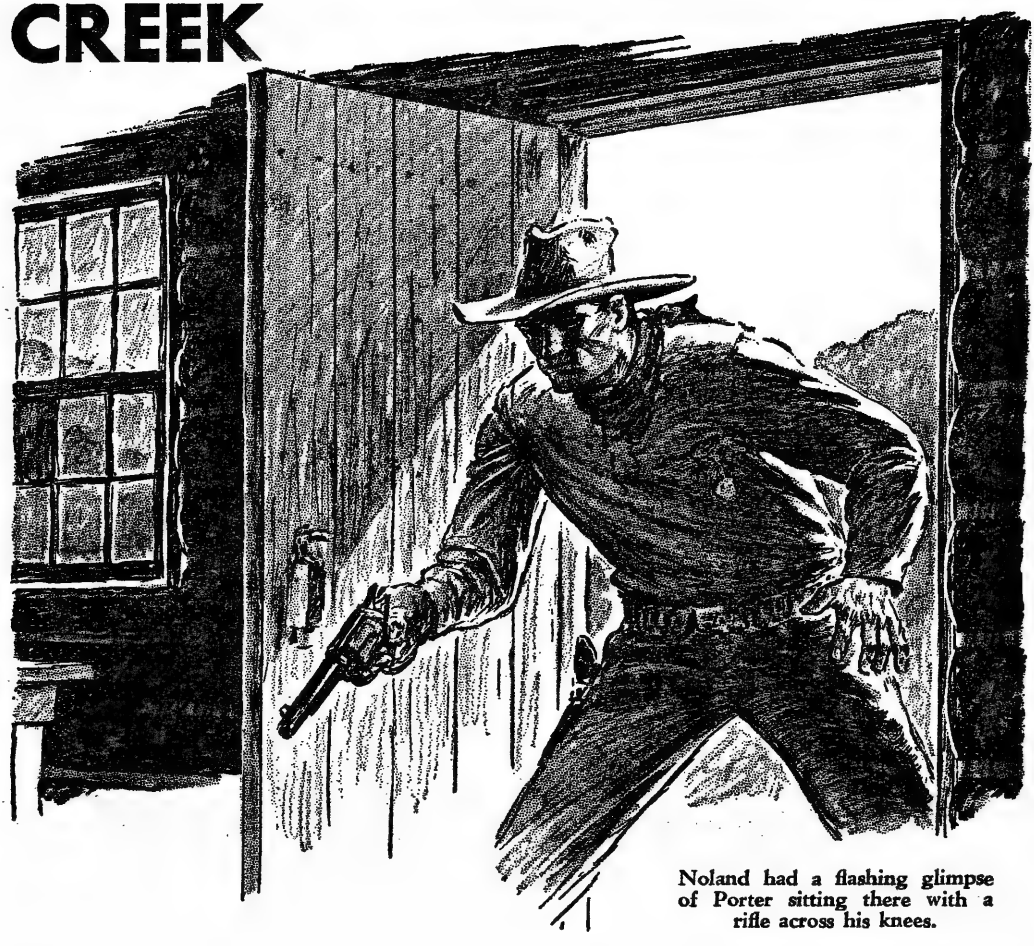
Young Noland, hard-bitten though he was, wanted nothing so much as to ride away from war-pointed She-Devil Creek, where two women, and a strange, unseen killer had branded him fair game. But Noland's guts wouldn't let him go, after a murderer had made him segundo of Hell-Below Ranch—and his deadly, daily orders came from far beyond the grave!

CHAPTER ONE

Proddy Segundo

ED NOLAND left his horse at the gate, and as he walked up the path he knocked the cement dust from his hat and watched it blow ahead of him. He tossed the hat onto a cowhide chair on the porch and entered the house. The long living room only faintly showed the touch of a woman's hand. It was practically the way it had been in the days when old Hugo was alive, for Janice never came in here. At least not when Noland was posting the books or writing what letters were necessary to carry on ranch business.

He went to the safe, opened it, got the money he needed and made a note of the amount. From over the mantel he took a .30-30, and from a desk drawer a gun-belt with a .38 in the holster. He left the weapons



Noland had a flashing glimpse of Porter sitting there with a rifle across his knees.

on the desk and went through the dining room to the kitchen.

Anna was having a siesta on the back porch. She came awake instantly and sat up, fanning away flies as Noland spoke her name.

He said, "How about two days' grub, pronto?"

Anna knew English but she refused to speak it. She said, *"Si."*

Noland ignored the question in her eyes and went back in and upstairs and down the hall. He was aware, of course, that Janice probably knew his step, and knew who it was when he knocked. She said, "Come in," and when he opened the door she looked up casually from a solitaire layout.

She had two piles of money. Gambling with herself. Her eyes were gray and tempestuously remote, as if they perceived something in the far blue yonder beyond the vision, understanding or interest of other mortals. It rather irritated Noland.

He said, "We've got the tanks back in. I've left the boys finishing the job. I've got to go to town and wire for more pipe. A lot of that split when it was twisted around trees and can't be used."

Janice had been through the deck. She tapped it against the table to even the edges, turned it face down, and ran off three cards. Without looking at him, she said, "And you came all the way upstairs to say that?"

She was evidently making side bets on the game, for she played one of the cards and took a silver dollar from one of the stacks and put it on the other.

Noland said, "I thought I'd go up toward the Red Fork country, maybe around Burnt Bridge." He controlled his irritation under slow, unruffled words. "We've got to be ready to move some cattle—if we can lease grass from the Indians to move them to—in case the commissioner won't renew the She-Devil lease."

He spoke loudly, for he knew Anna would be straining her ears, out of natural curiosity, to know what he was up to, and he didn't want her to have to take time off from pack-

ing his grub to listen. He was tired. He wanted to get on the long road, and as soon as darkness came take a nap in the saddle. His horse was fresh and fat and lazy and could go all night.

Janice had been giving him the silent treatment for several weeks now—since the day, in fact, that he told her he was going to lock her in the smokehouse for the next three weeks, until she turned eighteen, if he saw her talking to Burt Porter or riding with him again. She made no comment now concerning his leasing reservation grass, but she looked at him swiftly and away again as if to say, "This is a pretty time for the foreman to run errands that anybody could run, with the ranch in trouble."

He reached back and shut the door behind him. He said, "The boys think they can handle things while I'm gone—but they understand that if they get to where they need another hand real quick they're to send up a smoke and blanket it every now and then. As a matter of fact, I only intend to wire the agent at Burnt Bridge about getting that grass."

Her eyes were faintly apologetic, he thought, as she realized that he was only disappearing to go on a quiet witch hunt. But her glance at him was so brief that he couldn't be quite sure of that.

Two years before this old man Hugo, her father, had lived until they got him home after they found him with a broken back where a wire across the trail had taken him from his horse. Noland had ridden for him since he was a kid, and was just ready to move onto his own land adjoining, which he had been proving up while getting a start of cattle. He now had four hundred head, counting cows, calves, yearlings, two-year-olds and big steers, running with Janice's Hell-Down-Below brand.

Before he died, Hugo called in his lawyer and revised his will. He said to Noland, "Promise me you'll stay on and run this outfit till my girl is of age, Ed. And treat her like she was your own. I've made you her legal guardian."

Well, Noland guessed if a daughter of his went out with Burt Porter he would lock her up, so that was what he had told Janice. Not that he had stopped there, of course. He had also told Porter he would kill him if he saw him with Janice, a fact of which she was aware. And she had said, "If you kill him, kill me next before I do something I might regret."

She went on playing now. Noland said, "Three more days and this will all be yours, and you'll be on your own, and after that you can handle your personal affairs to suit yourself."

"Thanks," she said coolly.

"And in the meantime," he finished, "I may run into Porter. If there's really anything between you and him, I ought to know it now."

She said, "That word 'anything' covers a lot of territory."

Noland stared at her impatiently. She was wearing a pair of tight-legged pants that he could tell had rubbed a saddle a lot, though he seldom saw her on a horse, and a blue silk shirt with a pin in the right cuff, and a silver cuff link in the other. One of the pair old Hugo had given her, and which she always wore for luck when she wore a shirt. He guessed she had lost the other, tearing through the chaparral somewhere, but he didn't at the moment care enough about it to ask.

"If you're going to beat the devil around the stump I'll have to play this out my own way," he warned.

"You do that," she said. "And be sure you take your dallies." And then she added, "If you are honestly interested in my wants, I want you to stay away from Burt Porter, and I want you to try to avoid trouble with him if you do meet him."

Noland nodded tautly. "All right, if that's how you feel. But if he comes hunting trouble, shall I send the body here or to his place?"

She didn't answer, and he said, "Remember this: he's not your kind and I don't think he's the marrying kind. As long as I'm rodding this place, I'll do what I said to him if I catch him with you—"

Nostrils flaring, she said, "I don't belong to you! It's none of your business—"

"Then I'll make it my buisness," he told her.

CHAPTER TWO

"Use Your Judgment About Killing Him. . ."

NOLAND thrust the rifle into the boot with some irritation. For two years of his total of thirty, Janice had been his responsibility. The last several weeks of those two years had been longer than the rest of his life put together, for until then she had been no worry to him, and the affairs of the ranch had gone well enough, jogging along from day to day. Then she suddenly got interested in Porter.

Not that Noland and Janice had ever been on exactly cordial terms—that is, not since the first week after Hugo's funeral. She hadn't been home long then from the convent in California, where she went to school. He had known, of course, but hadn't actually realized that she was sixteen. It wasn't that she didn't fill out her shirt or anything like that, for she did. But she had a winsome, dewy

look, and she gave him the general impression, somehow, of being about twelve. Catching her trying to rope a palomino outlaw they were keeping at stud, he snapped at her the way he would have snapped at any fool kid horse-jingler: "Let that critter alone or I'll tan your bottom. You hear?"

She colored and then her face paled and before he could apologize for his language—though he meant to let the sentiment stand, she said, "You wouldn't talk to me like that if I were your size, Noland," and walked off.

Evidently she believed him, though, for she let the horse alone after that—and she always treated him impersonally since then when she had to speak to him at all. It always graveled him when she called him Noland because it wasn't a man-to-man way in which she did it. Nor a patronizing one, either, as if he were a hired hand. It was a—well, he didn't know just what, but he figured she called him that because she first did it in the heat of anger, without thinking, and realized how it got under his hide. . . .

He tied the grub sack and the four canteens at cantle and horn, and rode down the lane to the barn and sacked up a bushel of oats—about thirty pounds or so—and put them behind the saddle, too, covering the whole business with his slicker. He had blankets in his cabin on his own place, but he wanted to let the news get around that he was on a trip, so he took an old bed roll that a drifter who had died here last year left in the barn and added it to the load.

He rode toward the tanks in the sparsely wooded valley below the spring from which they were piping the water down off the mountain. Cattle watered down here where they had shade and didn't have to clamber over the barren, rocky benches put on a lot of extra grease. On a couple of thousand marketable steers, it made a pile of money. And on eight thousand head of brood stock and young stuff, if made wintering easier.

Yet, the wreckage of the tanks and pipe night before last was not the worst thing—in itself, that is—that Noland had to worry about. The most important was to do his duty, the way old Hugo would have him do—toward Janice. The wreckage of the tanks could be the vandalism of a bunch of drunken cowboys out for a good time—Noland had seen such fool pranks happen—but he had sense enough to know it was not such a mild thing in this case. It was done with deliberate intent to cripple, and by someone who wanted to see the H-L-Below hurt. And, of course, the most worrisome angle was the guessing as to who would have done it, and what they would do next. That was why Noland wanted to hide out. That way, no one would wonder if he was watching them, because they would think, he hoped, he was out of the country.

Nor was he overly comforted by the failure of the commissioner to assure them that the eighty thousand acres of government land would be leased to them again when the due-date fell next week. He was going to send another wire about that when he wired for the pipe, and if he didn't get some satisfaction he was going to take a trip to see the commissioner and find out, one way or another, who was blocking the deal. H-L cattle had grazed that land for thirty years—Noland's lifetime.

SEVERAL of the men were on the far range, watching the water there. The other four were here, plastering the repaired concrete tanks on the inside as Noland rode up to them in the lengthening shadows. The pipe came only half way down its former half mile stretch from the barren benches, and cattle were milling up there, fighting to suck up the water that spurted out and gathered down the benches in pot holes. Fighting for the water kept them off the grass and worked off their fat, and besides, the cuts they got from each others' horns would have to be watched to keep screwworms out, as if there weren't enough to do without that.

Halting at the tanks, he said, "Two of you better watch that pipe tonight, and the other two the tanks. Damn my thick skull, I could've brought you down some supper if I'd thought."

Shorty Payne smeared a mixture of sweat and cement off his gray features onto his shirt sleeve. He had growled the loudest at having to do a hired man's labor, and worked the hardest at it. He said, "That's okay, Ed. We'll make out."

Noland said, "I still think Burt Porter may be mixed up in this. Use your own judgment about killing him if you catch him dead to rights. If I had another year to go here, I'd say pot him. But the big boss seems to want it the other way—so just do whatever you have to do at the time to save this stuff, and come Monday you can take your orders from her. Okay?"

Pete Cornwall said, "Okay, Ed," and the others nodded, rather solemnly, Noland thought, and glanced at each other.

Shorty Payne said, "Well, don't take any wooden Indians," and started smoothing plaster again. . . .

It was tough to feel like he had failed in the point where old Hugo would have been most anxious that he succeed, and where, in reality, he himself was most anxious to succeed. Not only for Hugo's sake and for the trust the man had reposed in him, but for the sake of Janice herself.

On the other hand, a woman was supposed to be grown when she was eighteen, and to

have as much horse sense as she would ever have, and he didn't believe in trying to lead other people's lives for them. Everyone had a right to his own particular hell, the way Noland saw it, and to get there in his own particular hand basket, and there was just one way for a body to learn anything and that was to go through an experience.

Besides, if she thought she loved Burt Porter, who was he to say she didn't? And if a woman loved a man, he guessed she could put up with a lot of things. Noland had seen it work both ways.

The trouble, though, was that Porter was not the kind of man to tie himself to a woman, not for very long, anyway. Maybe she knew that, and refused to make any plans with him, and that had driven him to blocking the new grass lease and to tearing up the tanks, a design to starve her into his arms. Or maybe he was the one who wouldn't make any plans, desiring to take the tougher—but eventually less complicated—method of starving the H-L out and grabbing it, instead of marrying it. Grab off the leased land, mess up the water, maybe set a few fires, and, perhaps in the long run, buy up some of the cattle at a sacrifice price.

But that sounded crazy, for some reason. There must be another angle to the whole deal that he couldn't see from where he stood, or else Burt had nothing whatever to do with the H.L's troubles. He passed a bunch of yearlings, some with Janice's brand—a big H, with the right-hand upright run on down into an L under the H and read H-L-Below, or, usually, Hell-Down-Below. The others had his own E N. Nice stuff—

He crossed the dry bed of She-Devil Creek. It was here that the woman had left her tracks after she called for help so that old Hugo rode at breakneck speed through the timber and got stripped off his horse by the wire that went from tree to tree for a hundred feet so as to be sure he wouldn't miss it. And the same woman had put the wire up, for the matter of that. No other tracks were to be found.

CHAPTER THREE

One Dead Bull

CLAMBERING through the cedar and cottonwood toward the road, he got a whiff of dust, and presently it became thick enough that he could see it blowing thinly down upon him. Then, coming out of the draw to the road, he saw three riders approaching.

He recognized the ratty old nag straddled by the center man as that of Crunch Malone who lived in a shanty on She-Devil, near where the road turned off to town. And that looked like Crunch on the critter, all right. He was a ne'er-do-well squatter, who hadn't even bothered to prove up on his land, but who had just thrown up a shack and moved in. The government tolerated him as long as he cut no marketable timber, nor sold any of the scrub stuff he cut into wood for himself. And the ranchers tolerated him because he was always so busy resting or riding somewhere "to see about some business," as he always said, that he never got around to doing any plowing—a process hated mainly by the ranchers because weeds followed the plow, for some reason, and then the seed blew to hell and back, and the range through here was too good to let the weeds take it.

The man on the left sat his horse like Burt Porter but it was a bay and not the black that Porter usually rode. The third man, Noland saw as the distance lessened, was a horse-breeder named Baily from the Buffalo Jaw section fifty miles eastward—a man supposedly the silent partner in Porter's cattle ranch here. He was a pleasant fellow except when drinking, when he became moody, and Noland had had a couple of good bear hunts with him in time past.

Now he saw that the man on the left was Porter, and his heart quickened in spite of himself, and his hand trembled with the reins with a mixture of anger and suppressed excitement. It made him mad just to look at the man. Yet, the meeting was something of a break, because Porter was the one he wanted mostly to think him out of the country.

He would have ridden by the trio with only a nod to Porter and a word to Crunch, except that they were with Baily. He judged they were discussing him—Porter, tall and well built and with far too many good looks for any one man, and Crunch, shabby and grinning as usual, and Baily, who, though small, and effeminate in his ways, was tough in a fight. A thing as surprising as his monumental bursts of profanity when something displeased him.

They were quite near now, and reining in, he said, "Hello there, Crunch," and gave a nod that could or couldn't include Porter, just whichever way Porter wished to take it. He leaned over, extending the hand from which he had peeled a riding glove, and shook with Baily.

Bailey's humor-filled little eyes had crinkles around them, as if he were constantly about to burst out laughing. Shaking hands, he then sagged to one side of the saddle to relax. He said, "I was going to turn off down the holler to see you, Ed. Heard you had some bad luck."

"Did, sort of."

Crunch said, "I was sho tore up to hear about it, Ed."

"Thanks," Nolan said.

Crunch had wet, raw lips, from a habit he had of sort of drooling all the time. His stubbled face wrinkled in a grin of embarrassment, the way it always did when you looked him squarely in the eye.

Noland saw that they had spotted his provisions, but they made no comment. And then, as if to break the lull in the talk, Baily said casually, "Somebody shot and killed Burt's best bull yesterday or maybe last night. A woman, judgin' from the tracks around the .30-30 cartridge we found where the bull had been laid in wait for." He cleared his throat. "Show 'im that cuff link you found, Burt. He might recognize it."

Porter was eyeing the .30-30 stock—Noland's horse had half turned to snatch at some grass—and now he glanced at Noland, his dark eyes bland and mocking and insolent. He flipped up the end of his watch chain, and on the end of it was Janice's missing cuff link.

Noland said, "And you think the owner of that shot your bull?"

Porter said, "Don't make me laugh," and after a moment's pause he added, "I just think somebody wanted me to think that. What do you think, Noland?"

Noland said, "Maybe it was the same woman who killed Old Hugo." He reached for the cuff link, but Porter jerked it away.

He drawled, "I'll see that it gets home."

Nolan crowded his horse against the man, and in the next breath Baily had driven his own animal between them.

He said, "Now you boys take it easy. You remind me of a couple of young bulls pawin' the ground over the same heifer."

Noland whirled sharply on him. He said, "Shut your damned mouth, Baily!"

Baily exclaimed, "Oh, no offense, Ed. What's eatin' you? Damn my soul, I don't get it!" He made a placating gesture. "Gosh, I didn't aim to rile you, Ed. Lord, me and you are friends—"

Noland said, "Porter, if I find even your horse's tracks on the Hell Below, this country won't be big enough for the two of us." His every instinct cried out for him to tear the man out of the saddle and take that cuff link, but he figured he would end by killing him if he did. And if Janice wanted him, she was welcome to him. After three more days.

HE RODE on past, not looking back, but he had kind of a lame feeling inside as if he had sort of backed down at a time when he shouldn't, and he swore at himself silently.

Baily called softly in Spanish after him, "Go with God!"

Noland didn't look back.

He came finally to where the road to town turned off this one to the right. To the left was the trail that led a couple of hundred yards down through the brush to Crunch Malone's shanty on the creek. He saw Crunch's daughter down there, hanging out clothes on the back yard fence, and abruptly he turned down that way, his anger still hot within him. He stopped at the sagging front fence and helloed. Three or four hounds sauntered out from under the porch, yawning and stretching, and stood wagging their tails and barking ferociously. Inside the house, Malone's usually ailing wife called out, "Nora! Somebody rode up!"

Noland stepped from the saddle as the girl came to the door, which was approximately twenty feet from the hole in the fence where the front gate had once been, but which was now blocked by a couple of rails to keep out range cattle.

Taking off his hat, Noland said, "Any chance me leaving some stuff here a couple of hours, Nora, while I go into town?"

Rather reserved, she came down the steps. He had taken her to a frolic a year ago and found her a lot of fun after she forgot her silent ways and let herself go. He reckoned she had been embarrassed at first, just from being Crunch Malone's daughter. Not that you would have guessed to look at her clothes that night that she came from this shack. Round breasted, with widening hips setting off her small waist, she was easy to look at. He guessed she was seventeen or eighteen—or a year younger or older either way. The Tabor boy she was going with was eighteen, so Noland guessed she was probably no older than that.

She said, "Sure, Ed. You can leave anything here you want to."

He untied his grub sack and bed roll and the sack of oats from the horse's sweaty rump and lifted them into the fork of a cottonwood, and she looked at them but asked no questions. A man carrying grain was going into the north, so there was no need to ask him. There was grass up that way, but not enough to support ranches, and consequently no place a man could get grain for a working animal.

His eyes happened to meet Nora's and she colored a bit, remembering, perhaps, as he did, the last time they had stood here. That night he brought her home from the frolic. He had stripped her horse and thrown the animal into the pasture and lugged the gear here to the gate. She said, "'Twon't rain. Just leave it here. Pop will put it up in the morning."

They had had a lot of fun and, as she stood hesitant, there seemed only one natural way to top off the evening. He kissed her lightly and then let his hands slip to her armpits, and lifted her over the rails that blocked

the gate and put her quickly and gently down inside.

She had laughed and said, "Well, good night, Ed. Come back some time."

"Sure," he said. "Good night."

But he hadn't gone back. He never stopped to figure out just why—it was easier simply to lay it upon the press of work—but vaguely he realized that some magnetic, she-animal quality had welled up out of her, attracting him as they kissed, and that if he went another time he would go again and again and again. And then, first thing he knew, he would be married to her. That was the way things like that first started. A woman was one thing he didn't want cluttering up his life. For a few months everything was rosy, but then—well, he'd seen it happen over and over. First thing a man knew, he couldn't even spit in his own fireplace without first checking up to see if his wife was going to approve. . . .

Now it occurred to him that this was the first time he had talked with Nora since that night, though he had run onto Crunch now and then. And he reckoned she was prettier now than she was then, with her dark hair about her face. It looked as if she had caught it swiftly back when she saw him coming, but it gave a nice effect.

He said, "Uh—anything I can bring you from town?"

She shook her head. "I guess not."

Awkwardly he said, "Well, reckon I better mosey. . . ."

Ed Noland sent the wire for the pipe and one to the land commissioner and then he went to Pride's store and made arrangements with old man Pride to haul the pipe out the second it came in tomorrow. Then he bought a box of hard and soft peppermint candies, tied with a red ribbon. Old man Pride looked at him slyly over his spectacles, but Noland pretended not to notice.

"Give me two-bits worth of that loose candy," he added crisply. For that box would be like a calf in a stampede, turned loose with Crunch.

As he paid for it, Pride said, "Oh, by the by. Letter come since Shorty was in for them pipe joints." He went back to the post office cubicle and got it, and Noland felt a giddiness as he saw that it was from the commissioner. And it was something to make a man giddy—whether it said the lease would be renewed, or wouldn't, or—like the last three letters—that it was still in abeyance.

Casually, though, he said, "Thanks," and walked out of the dusky store and stepped into the saddle. He could depend on Pride to spread the news far and wide that he would be gone for a while.

He could still see to read, and he had to look the letter over twice before he actually believed it. The lease would be renewed.

Noland breathed a long-drawn, "Ah-h-h-h!" and took the road at a good clip, and then he whirled about and rode back to the depot and yelled in at the agent who was waiting for the night train: "You sent that wire to the c'missioner yet?"

The man peered out. "Jist started. Got his name on the wire."

Noland said, "Good. Just change the wire to say, 'Thanks.' And you keep the rest of that money and buy yourself a cigar, Pink." He turned and hit the road again, light-hearted for perhaps a hundred yards.

Then something came to him: Whoever had been trying to lease that grass knew how it was going to turn out. That was why they had gone to work on the tanks and pipe. Now they would commit some other devilment, maybe this very night.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rough and Tumble

IT WAS just coming moon-up when the Malone dogs bayed him from a quarter mile away. Then words came to him as clearly as if he were down at the shanty: "For God's sake, you damn' dogs, shut up!" It was Crunch's voice.

When the road ran into the north-south road, he slowed to head down the brushy slope toward the lamp-yellowed door and window of the shanty. Suddenly his horse threw up its head, skittering sideways. It had been lazing around too long without anything to do, and might be shying at anything from a wood-rat to a human one. Nevertheless, he was a little edgy as he looked about, quietly drawing the .38.

Then Nora drawled, "Don't shoot, cowboy," and he saw her leaning against a big sycamore.

Feeling a little foolish, he got down.

She said, "I've been out hunting the old cow, but she's found out I can't find her if she stands still so her bell won't ring."

He could see her quite well now as she moved away from the tree. She had done her hair up fresh and he liked the smell of the newly-ironed dress. He said, "I—uh—thought you might like this."

He extended the package that had the red-bowed box in it.

She hesitated, saying, "For me?" and looked from it to him, a long, slow look. Then, as they walked along, the horse behind, she took it and undid the string as calmly as if someone brought her a present every night.

When she saw what it was, she said, "That's awfully nice of you, Ed." But it still seemed to make little difference. Her mind seemed to be somewhere else. She undid the ribbon

and raised the lid back and offered the box.

He took a piece. He said casually, "Your dad and them find what they were looking for?"

"What was that?"

"Whoever shot Burt's bull, I guess. A woman, they said."

He watched her bite a chocolate wafer in two. And after a moment she said, "I don't know. He hasn't come home. Who was he with? Burt?"

Ed Noland had a quick answer on his tongue, but he swallowed it. If she wanted to be cagey, two could play that game. He said, "Why, they never mentioned their names." But it was more than cageyness when she said Crunch hadn't come home.

She said, "Well, he wasn't home when I went for the old cow. . . . What woman would be shooting Burt's stock?"

"Maybe the same one who killed old Hugo," Noland said.

"Could it be a man with small feet?"

"Not that small."

She walked on down the fence in silence with him and then she said, "Ridin' far?"

"Pretty far," he said slowly. He wondered what she would say if he asked her if she had ever thought of leaving this country. But he didn't like the way she hadn't been truthful with him. She must have heard Crunch cussing the dogs, and the dogs were lying right there on the porch, batting their tails in lazy recognition of Noland's presence, muzzles stretched on their paws. He could see them in the lamplight. He wondered who was in there —and why she told him—

He said, "I've brought your mother something, too," and made a slight gesture with the sack of candy he still held as he dropped the reins over a paling and turned toward the gate.

She said, "I'll take it." And before he could prevent, she did. She leaned against the rails across the gate, there in front of him, and offered him the box again. He shook his head and turned and got his stuff from the fork of the tree. and she came up to him.

In a low voice, she said, "If you don't mind, I'll go a piece with you and maybe I'll see that cow. She ought to be milked tonight."

Noland shook his head. "Better to let her go than to be out after dark. And I'm in kind of a hurry."

Her voice was taut. "I guess you're one of these men who don't like girls."

"Did I say so?"

"Didn't you? Oh, maybe not in words—"

He asked, "Would I have brought that," he nodded toward the box, "if I didn't like girls?"

She seemed not to hear him. "Or do you just like them if they have eight or ten thousand head of cattle? Is that why you don't want Burt Porter around her?"

He looked at her a moment without speaking, and then as he started to get on the horse she said, "All right. I lied to you. Go on in there and get your brains blown out. Why should I care? What's it to me?"

Noland took his foot from the stirrup. "Who's in there?" he asked. He had already started to climb the fence.

She said, "Mr. Baily. He's drunk as a lord. He claims you insulted Burt Porter—his dear friend, as he calls him—and he wants to shoot you."

Crunch Malone came to the door. "He's gone to sleep," he said. "Don't think nothin' about it, Ed. He'll be all right come mawnin'. Jist his whisky talkin' . . . Don't reckon I smell pep'mint candy, do I?"

Angrily, Noland said, "I wouldn't know." He clambered onto his horse and turned and rode swiftly up the path. He heard the girl call something after him, but he didn't understand it and he was in no mood to ask her what it was.

HE WAS still angry from the remark she had made about Janice as he turned off the road after he was out of earshot of the shanty. Moving down to the left toward the creek bed, he startled a bunch of cattle that went galloping off.

The moon was getting up pretty well now, so that he recognized Malone's old spotted cow a few minutes later when he came upon her. She was standing very still so that her bell would not ring, and at sight of her the words Nora had spoken came afresh to his mind.

Moodily he wondered if folks thought that the reason he didn't want Burt Porter around Janice was because he wanted her for himself —and if they thought he wanted her because of what she had. Well, the hell with the whole business. He would be glad when he could wash his hands of it. Sell his claim and cabin and cut his cattle out of her stuff and move northward. Winter on the reservation and in the spring graze into Wyoming where there was still free range. That crack Baily had made about a couple of bulls pawing the ground over the same heifer. The more Noland thought about it, the more it galled him. The fool must have had a few drinks in him at the time, but if a man couldn't hold his liquor and his tongue both, he shouldn't drink. Damn his insolence!

Noland drew his horse up, half a mind to go to Malone's and—Ah, well. The fellow was drunk, and a head shorter than Noland. The hell with him. And with women. If Janice wanted Porter and could get him, fine. Then Porter could worry about the H-L's troubles while Noland was building up an outfit in

Wyoming. He would give his men orders, when he got settled up there, to shoot any female under the age of sixty who came messing around. Yes, sir. Damn' tootin', he would. . . . He wished he had him one of those guns he'd read about that shot square bullets that the Christians used to use in their wars with the Mohammedans.

He sighed, riding on. Guessed he was a little addled with weariness and lack of sleep. He was getting onto the corner of his own land now. None of his homestead was fenced, except a corral and little night pasture. He headed for his house. He would unload his horse there and mosey on toward Burt Porter's to see what he could see.

Startled, he straightened in the saddle, peering forward. A man was sitting quietly on a horse ahead of him. Instinctively he recognized him. He said, "Porter?"

Porter drawled, "That's me."

Noland spurred his horse, and in the same second Porter came to meet him, and with a joyous, soul-relieving curse, Noland freed his feet from the stirrups and raised them to the saddle. They met, wheeling their horses to get together, and Noland launched himself out of the saddle. He caught Porter haphazardly and bore him from his horse and they lit in a struggling heap. Guns were forgotten. Noland didn't want to shoot him. He wanted to beat him to death.

He panted, "I told you to stay off this range!"

Porter broke free and, on his knees, swung a haymaker that missed, and then they were up, slugging with silent, deadly fury. Pain deadened by anger, by a pent-up fury of weeks, Noland didn't feel the blow that caught him half on the nose and half on the jaw and rocked him back. He warded off the follow-up and plowed in, lacing quick, hard jabs into Porter's ribs and into his face. He caught one in his own middle then that doubled him, but instinctively he dodged the uppercut that followed.

"I'm going—to learn—you a lesson—" Porter panted. "I'm going—"

Noland slammed a fist into his mouth. Felt teeth sink into his knuckles at the impact. He followed up, but Porter came at him with deadly, angry force, mindless of the blows. They were down, then, and Porter went for his eyes. Noland didn't remember the rest of the fight. The next he remembered he was standing up, hanging to the pommel of his saddle for support, and gulping down air and spitting out the blood that got into his mouth from his nose. And Porter was lying very still. He moved a foot a little, then.

Noland raised a hand tenderly to his nose. It wasn't broken. He didn't feel like getting onto his horse, but he finally did. He clamped his nostrils between thumb and finger to stop the blood, and headed toward the spring. He looked back. Porter was sitting up, and then the man called thickly, "Noland, I'm going to remember this."

"Ah?" said Noland. "I guess you'll remember it a long time, all right, when you see your face."

CHAPTER FIVE

Nora

HIS nose stopped bleeding presently, and he was feeling better. A lot better. He felt almost good.

Behind him, Shorty Payne growled, "Damn it, Ed, I nearly conked you. What you doing? You—"

Noland drawled, "Oh, I've been courting." And it covered his confusion at letting himself get jumped this way.

Shorty said, "Fine time to be courting."

"Oh, it took no extra time." He turned his horse half about, getting down, and Shorty stared at him.

"She must've resisted your advances," he said.

Noland looked at the bloody front of his shirt. "Oh, that," he said. "Well, that's another story."

Shorty called softly, "Hey, it's just the boss!"

"So I gathered," Janice said quietly from a little distance.

"I think he's drunk," Shorty added.

Janice came out of a clump of rocks with a .30-30 under her arm. She was doing something to one of her cuffs, and Noland saw the moon-glint of two silver links now. And all mixed in with his surprise at seeing her here was the further surprised realization that Nora had been right. His interest in Janice was certainly not impersonal, nor simply friendship. He realized that his joy in fighting Burt Porter was for exactly the reason that Baily said it was. This was the woman he wanted, and it was her indifference to him as well as Porter's attention to her that made him savage.

Shorty Payne said, "Well, I guess I've deserted my post long enough. About time to change guards, too. . . ." He faded into the brush and a little later Noland saw him a piece down the slope, heading for the tanks, and no doubt eager for the blankets where another of the boys was now pounding his ear.

Janice said, "Trouble, Noland?" She was looking him over, and he guessed he was something to look at. "That girl you were courting must have packed quite a very pretty wallop . . . Who won?"

"I sort of wonder," he answered. And

then, looking at the cuff links, he said, "Well, I guess you win, far as you and I are concerned. The lease will be renewed on the grass. I got a letter about it from the commissioner. And soon as the books are balanced and I get a release from the court, that'll clean me up here . . . If you'll be old enough to know your own mind next week, far as I'm concerned you're old enough now—"

She said, "I've thought I was that old for a couple of years."

"That's been clear . . . You and Porter can go ahead any time." He realized now that Porter did want her. Nothing else could have made him fight so hard, for he was a man proud of his looks and not inclined to get them messed up. "He's got enough hands to put a stop to this war—if just marrying him doesn't put a stop to it. I'll cut my cattle out of yours, or sell them to you, or just take mine and yours as they come until I get what the tally book showed me in the spring."

"However you want it." She gave a short whistle and a horse came out of the brush. Almost before he saw that it was the palomino stallion that no one could ride she had jumped into the saddle and headed toward the spring.

AT four-thirty, as the sky began to gray, Noland rode wearily past the place where he and Porter had fought. It must have been one hell of a scrap, he decided, from the looks of the ground. Even worse than his face, the way it looked in the water bucket at his cabin this morning, would lead a body to believe. His nose was swollen and one eye half closed, and it hurt him to chew. His right hand was all stove up and two of his knuckles badly cut from Burt's teeth. He had washed up and put on an old shirt he had at his place, but the knee was out of his pants and he didn't cut an extra wide swath, he reckoned.

After a time, as he rode on, he heard the Malone cow's bell. He found a pressed-down place in the grass where she had slept, and he went on toward her bell, down the draw. She looked at him placidly for a moment when he came upon her, and then went on picking. He got down and gingerly seated himself on the ground and rolled a smoke with shaky fingers.

It was sunrise when he saw Nora coming, but instead of moving swiftly, like someone coming to a bell, she was watching the ground and taking her time.

Noland took a deep breath and rose, whistling a low note as he rubbed out his cigarette. She straightened, staring at him as he came to meet her, and when he was close he saw a faint stain rising into her cheeks and her dark eyes were questioning and unsure.

She said, "You always take a grub sack and some horse feed to make a six-mile circle?"

"Not always." And glancing down he saw an oat on a rock and a few feet farther back another on the ground. So that explained the hole in his nearly empty oat sack. It had looked like it was cut, when he discovered the oats were gone last night when he unsaddled, rather than torn on a limb. He said, "You cut it?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why was it cut?"

"Maybe somebody wanted to see which way you were going. Maybe anybody seeing that old dirty bed roll that drifter left with you would know you didn't plan to sleep in it—that you weren't going very far."

Noland digested that in silence.

She said, "I guess Burt looks some worse than you do. You split his cheek, over the bone."

He shrugged. It really made no difference. He said, "You ever thought any of getting married?"

She didn't answer, and he said, "I've been wondering all night how you go about asking a woman to marry you. How do you?"

"I wouldn't know. I never asked one."

Noland asked, "How would this do?" and he took her in his arms and kissed her. He felt the tremble of her body, but she made no response, her hands remaining at her sides and her lips passive. And when he allowed her to, she leaned back against his hands and asked, "What brought this on?"

"That's a romantic question. I guess the answer to it is that it's come to me if I want you I better be doing something about it, before somebody else does. I'm pulling out one of these days with my cattle."

"And asking me to marry you because you love another woman so much you can't bear to stay in the same country with her unless she's yours? She says no, so you come over here?" Her mouth trembled. "You could have left me a little pride."

She twisted away from him. She said, "Go on. Go away and leave me alone, Ed." She ran toward the cow and started her home through the brush.

Noland called, "When I get my cattle rounded up, I'll be by with a preacher."

She didn't answer, or look back. . . .

It might take the court several days to check the books, after he got them balanced, so he could get released from his job as executor of old Hugo's estate. The first thing was to balance them and take them to town and get some hands to cut out his cattle if that was the way Janice wanted to handle it. It was hot to be moving then, and hot for men and horses, and he would have to pay

good wages to get any help. But that was a small matter.

The worst part about hauling out was that he had sworn when old Hugo was killed he would find who put that wire across the trail, and he knew no more today than he knew two years ago when he learned that it was a woman. Outside of that he knew nothing. Of course, there was the possibility that he had been headed up a blind canyon, trying to find out who was enough of an enemy to old Hugo to do that. Maybe it was not Hugo she was after. Maybe not.

Well, that was just one of those things you came up against. Maybe he'd be back down some day. Nora would be wanting to see her parents now and then. He would let Crunch and her mother have his claim, if they wanted it. Make it over to them. Maybe with land of his own Crunch would do better.

He felt suddenly very humble that Nora cared for him, and a protective feeling swept over him toward her. She was feeling all torn up now, but he'd stop on his way to town with the books and by then maybe she would be settled down. She'd have had time to do some thinking by then. He'd tell her some of the things women like to hear from their men. And by the time she had her first baby, they'd be happy. Have memories of their own to think about, and not be interested in a lot of things that seemed so vital now.

CHAPTER SIX

Gunsmoke Rendezvous

HE HAD let the books get in a worse mess, he reckoned, than he would think possible until he got to trying to straighten them up. But if it came out within a hundred dollars either way he would call it square. Make up the difference out of his pocket, if necessary, and get going.

The jingler had come in for grub for the men down on the lower range, beyond Old Woman Pass, and as Noland cared for his horse in the barn the kid told him everything was fine there.

He went on in then the back way, nodded to Anna who was packing grub, and went into the front room and opened the safe. Then he sat back on his heels. The books were gone.

He banged the door, turned the knob, and went upstairs. Janice's door was open, but she was not there, and the books were not in sight. She was the only one besides himself who knew that combination, and irritably he strode across the room and jerked the closet door open. He saw the corner of one of the ledgers on the blanket shelf. He pulled it out, and then he saw the other, and in getting it he pulled down some bed covers. They wouldn't go back straight, and as he pushed and crammed at them he swore to himself. Something was in the way. Tiptoeing, he ran his hand back on the shelf and jerked out a boot and started to threw it aside when he froze, staring at it. It was a medium sized boot to start with—but the sole had been built up with successively smaller pieces of leather until the one that touched the ground was very small indeed so that the wearer would make a track much tinier than his foot. The heel was the same, built down to match the sole.

Sweating, Noland fished in the shelf for the mate to the boot and pulled it out. There was a startled sound behind him. He whirled. It was Anna. But apparently she hadn't noticed anything amiss with the boots. She was just surprised to see him here, he guessed.

He said shortly, "I came up here after the ledgers," just as if it were any of her damned business, and matter of factly he threw the boots into the closet, crammed the comforters back helter skelter, and kicked the door shut.

Anna said, in Spanish, "Señorita meant to take the books back down before you got home."

It sort of hurt him that Janice would check up on him, but he said nothing. Downstairs he opened them and started to get his bills and vouchers, and then he saw that they were brought neatly up to date, with the balances in, and even to the penny.

Behind him, Anna said, "The señorita has been working on them lately to save you trouble. She says you have too much to do, already." She started toward the kitchen, and at the doorway she turned. For the first time she spoke to him in English. She said, "You are one damn' fool, yes! Pah! Me, I would know what to do to that girl! Yes!" She waddled off, and, on afterthought, she yelled back, "You can't fire me. I work for the señorita. I can say what I please." Then she added, "Yessss!" He heard her banging the dog out of the stove lids.

Swiftly he went back to get the boots, gumshoeing along the hall on his toes to Janice's room and to the closet. They were gone.

THE room was hot, there at Judge Curson's, and a blue bottle fly buzzed and sang. Sweat dripped down now and then from the judge's nose as he stared wisely at the books, and finally he said, "Well, I ain't got time to rightly look these figgers over jist now, Ed."

Noland said, "But I want a release. Anybody in town will go my bond. I want to get out of here."

"Sho, now, Ed! I ain't worried about the books—but we got to be legal, an' everything. But it ain't the fourteenth till Monday, and

that's when yo' time is up . . . By the way—if I was you I'd put a stop to Burt Porter messin' around old Hugo's girl. You go leavin' town, an' what'll become of her?"

Noland was pretty fed up with folks telling him how to handle Janice. He said shortly, "She's of age."

"Not till Monday. An' meantime, if I was her guard-een, I'd beat the hell out of her with a harness strap, if 'twas necessary, to get a little sense into her. Or—" he peered at Noland, "if I was thutty year younger an' had your looks—discountin' that black eye, and et cetry—I'd marry her myself. Uh—what happened to you? Throwed by a horse?"

Noland said, "Look, judge, I want to get loose."

The judge nodded. "Come Monday, I'll try to give you a release if I get these books went over by then. If you left town without it, might look as if somethin' was wrong with the accounts. Wher' you goin', Ed?"

"To see if ol' man Pride's got that pipe loaded out yet." He stalked from the room, and then on the porch he turned. He started to tell the judge he was going to marry Nora Malone, and then, changing his mind, went to his horse. He could hear the clatter of pipe into a wagon at the railroad. They would get it put in by night—and then tomorrow he'd start rounding up his cattle. And have a talk with Janice about those damned boots.

What were they doing in her closet? Not that he expected she would tell him. She'd probably tell him instead that he'd had no business poking around in there—which was true enough, of course.

Well, in a day or two he'd have his cattle together, and be married to Nora, and on his way. On his way north to get out of this country, and to get Janice out of his mind and heart. He could see now that he had felt this way about her for months without knowing it. He had always thought of her as a child to be raised instead of a woman already old enough to be married and have a child of her own.

Ah, well, married to a woman who loved you, you could work hard for her and like it, and soon it would seem that you had always been married to her. You'd get to know her ways, and she yours, and soon you'd be laughing together over the antics of your children learning to ride and rope. He wouldn't want Janice now even if he could kill Burt Porter and get her, knowing that he was second choice. He could understand how Nora felt, sensing that she was second choice with him. But he would make it up to her.

Startled, Noland stared at a rising column of smoke to the eastward as it suddenly broke and came again. And broke once more. He'd told Janice if she needed him. . . .

HE ROWELLED the horse, leaving the road to cut across the broken country. Timber and hills shut off his view in a moment, and he rode by guess, heading roughly—he hoped—for the line cabin near Old Woman Pass. Of course, maybe that fool kid jingler or a drifter, or no telling who, had stopped there to cook himself a snack and the smoke had just happened to do that way. But nobody put green cedar into a fire except to make a smoke, and that looked like that was what that was.

Or maybe one of the boys was making the smoke to call him. Maybe one of them had run into whoever was making the trouble and had got shot up and was calling for help. Maybe a million things. Maybe that stallion had thrown Janice and hurt her and she had managed to get a fire built.

Distance went behind him. His sweating horse slid down steep banks, clawed its way up steeper ones, and skirted sheer bluffs. It was a crazy man's ride, taking him into places dark and gloomy, overhung by timbered bluffs, where he had only gone afoot before.

Now he had circled in the canyons and hollows until he had lost his bearings, and he halted to consider. It was then he saw the tracks. A woman's tracks in the dampness of the dry water course. She was leading a horse, or at least was walking in front of it—or someone was following her. Someone with sheepskin chaps, for a bit of wool hung on a thorn tree. Fresh tracks. Maybe Janice had come through here afoot, and someone followed her.

Sweat broke on Noland's body and dried as swiftly as it had come, leaving him cold. He would get on high ground, out of the brush, and get a line on that smoke, if it was still rising.

He looked for a way up the steep bank. There was no way for a horse that he could see and he didn't know how far he would have to go to find a way. But he could make it afoot, and then it wasn't far—unless he were entirely lost—to Old Woman Pass. If that's where the smoke was. Maybe by now it had gone out, wherever it was.

Noland slid to the ground in the deep, gloomy stillness and drew the .30-30 from the boot. Clawing and grunting and hanging to vines and brush, he got up the thirty foot bank, and it was then that he became aware of the half-heard, half-imagined beat of a walking horse's hoofs.

Swiftly and silently he ran forward, his heart thudding in his ears until he could hear nothing. Finally he stopped again, throwing his head to one side to listen. There was no sound except his heartbeat and his own breathing when he could hold his breath no longer. He ran on, stopped to listen once more, and

ran again. Suddenly he was desperately afraid.

The shot crashed out, almost in his face, but he had seen the hint of movement in the cedars ahead and instinctively ducked, and he was vaguely aware that he was still alive as he fired the .30-30. Someone gave a moaning cry, stumbled back through the cedar—and then there was a moment of silence followed by a *whooshing* thud like the landing of a cow that has been crowded over a bluff. Noland started through the brush—and then ahead he saw an old nag of a horse fighting at the bridle reins that held it to a tree. Crunch Malone's horse. A dead sheep was tied on its back. Very obviously dead of hoof and mouth disease.

Evidently gun-shy, as well as maddened by the stinking burden, it suddenly broke the reins. Noland raised his rifle, levering it, and fired. The animal whirled, screaming, and he fired again, and without a sound it dropped with a shot through the neck. Sick, Noland stumbled forward. He hated to hurt any horse, but that sheep could spell complete ruin to the cattlemen for miles around—like when Noland was a kid and he and old Hugo used up a case of .22 shells in one day on the stricken herds.

He stood there near the twitching horse, his mind so stunned that he couldn't put two thoughts together—and then the smell of smoke came to him. He forgot the dead horse and the sheep and his weariness and his burning lungs and ran on. His second wind began coming to him as he scrambled up another slope, and his heart slowed down.

From the top he could see the cabin—and from its stove pipe faint smoke was rising. Whatever Janice wanted him for, she was evidently gone now—if it was Janice. The back of the cabin was solid to fend off the winter wind, and the left end was solid, too. Noland ran on, keeping in the brush and circling to the left a little.

And finally he left the brush and ran across the open space to the cabin, his flesh gathering against the expected impact of lead. He was at last near enough that he could touch the gray logs. He crept around the corner to the window, rifle in his left hand, pistol in the right. There was only one way to find out what was going on in there, and that was to look in and see—and whoever was in there could see him against the light quicker than he could make out the details of the room.

A pan lid rattled. And then Burt Porter said, "Well, I've been patient with you. I'm as good as Noland. And you're the one who started hanging around me—meeting me accidentally as you rode, and all that. What did you expect me to think? I'm offering to marry you—and has Noland ever done that? You all live over there for two years with just that dim-witted old Anna who doesn't knew what's going on even in her own head, and then try to act so pure and innocent. Well—I won't argue any longer. I'll have my dinner and by then you can have your mind made up as to which way you want to play this out."

Noland ducked under the window, his hair crawling, and into the open doorway. He had a flashing glimpse of Janice at the stove. Of Porter sitting there with a rifle across his knees. Noland dropped his rifle.

The man swung it up and Noland fired, and he heard his pistol bullet hit the rifle barrel—or maybe the zinging was only part of the avalanche of whirling black sound that suddenly engulfed him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

New Boss For Hell-Below

WHEN it lifted, it was by degrees. He heard Porter's pleasant voice. Presently the words came more clearly: "Mighty nice cookin', kiddo. You done a fine job while you were stalling for time." And then: "I guess your friend is awake."

On the floor, Noland discovered that he was tied. He turned his head. Porter was at the table, Janice standing across from him. Porter grinned at Noland. His face was cut and swollen in purple blotches, from their fight last night.

A long, slow grin, and then he drawled, "Hello, pal. You sure walked in on me. I saw the girlie making smoke to call you and I was watching for you, but I kind of had my mind on pleasanter things." He glanced at Janice and said, "More coffee, baby." And as she brought it, he picked up his pistol and rose and said, "I know you'll enjoy this, Noland."

He caught the girl into his arms and kissed her, and Noland saw the widening, steaming wetness on his side and hip as she tilted the pot and let the hot coffee pour upon him. But he finished his kiss. And then, sweating and white from the pain, he said, "For that, we'll give Mr. Noland some real entertainment." Half turning, he dipped up cold water from the bucket and poured it over the steaming place down his side and leg, and in that second Janice lashed out with the coffee pot across his skull.

He stumbled, whirling upon her, but she had backed swiftly away. Shoving the table before him, she stopped him for a breath and caught up a kettle from the stove and threw it. Warding it off with his hands, he dropped his pistol and it came skittering across the floor.

Noland rolled over and grabbed it in his tied hands and fired one time as Porter dived

to get it. The man sprawled down and blood gushed from his mouth over the pistol.

Janice stood there a moment, staring whitely at Noland, and then she picked up a knife from the table and cut his ropes. Pushing back her tawny hair where it had come down, she said tautly, "I didn't mean to draw you into this. I was making the smoke because I found a dead sheep somebody had planted on us and I thought you'd want to get your cattle out in a hurry. Porter—came—while I was making the smoke—and then there wasn't any way I could warn you not to come."

Noland sat up, trying to speak, but his head felt too big and dizziness spun the room before him. He raised a hand to his scalp and felt his hair sticky. If he had been an inch taller, he would be dead now from Porter's bullet.

He said, "I—"

And from the doorway a voice came. Crunch Malone's voice: "Say, you all seen my old pony anywheres? He—Lord God, what's been happenin'?"

Noland's vision cleared a little. Crunch was standing there gawping, and now he wheezed, "Burt—dead—?"

"Fortunately, yes," Noland said shortly. "And now I'm going to give you a break, Crunch, on account of—of your women folks. If you're the one hauled in those dead sheep—one of which is still tied to your pony's back—you better start hitting the high spots before a hanging party gets you."

And he could see well enough now to see that Crunch was teetotally surprised, or else a perfect actor. He stood there with his wet, raw mouth agape, his eyes bugging above his stubbled cheeks. And then he wheezed, "Oh, Lord God, Ed, I never done it. I wouldn't do nothin' like that. My old hoss, somebody must of stolen him. I found what I thought was his tracks, follerin' a woman's, an' lost 'em. I 'lowed he jist got to follerin' somebody. He'll do that—like a dog—and—and—you don't think I done it, do you?"

Noland thought one thing: Porter, of course, wouldn't bring in those sheep, because he had cattle of his own to lose. But if he had had a hand in the wrecking of the tanks, Crunch was the sort of fellow he would get to do the dirty work. Ten dollars would look mighty big to Crunch—and a hundred would be a fortune. And Crunch was wearing a brand new shirt and shoes.

Noland slowly got to his feet and when the room quit spinning again he said, "Well, you've been mighty thick with some people I don't like, Crunch. Wrecking our tanks and pipe is enough to send you up for years—"

He saw that he had scored. Crunch cried hoarsely, "I never—I never—"

"If you lie about that, how'll people know you're not lying about the sheep? How'd you like a rope around your neck, Crunch, and nothing but air under your feet?"

White, Crunch smeared a shaky arm across his face. "I—I did bust up the tanks. And the pipe. He made me do it, Ed. I didn't want to, but he made me. Back where I come from I was in a little trouble. He knew it."

Noland said, "All right. We'll leave it that way. You'll sign a statement when I get it drawn up so's we can put a claim against his estate for the damage to property and stock." He looked at Janice. "You ready to go?"

THE palomino stallion was in the barn with Porter's animal. Crunch and Janice brought them, and Noland said to Crunch, "After you burn those sheep, put Porter's body on that horse and take it to town and tell the sheriff I killed him and that I'll be in when I get around to it."

Nervously, Crunch said, "I sho hate to go takin' him in. I—"

Noland gave him a weary, silencing look, and after Janice had explained where the sheep was that she had found, Noland said, "I've got something to see about over here in the woods—got to get my horse—and then I'll be on to the house."

Anna would tell her he had been rummaging in her room. Indeed, if Janice was the one who got those boots so quickly after he threw them into the closet, she already knew it. But maybe she wasn't the one. Maybe Anna had known about them and grabbed them and hidden them elsewhere.

But he decided he better tell her now he had got the books and taken them in to the judge to check. "Thanks for fixing them up," he finished. "I've turned them in, and you're the boss of this outfit from here on." He looked at the stallion which was nuzzling her shoulder. And ungrudgingly he said, "Looks like you did a good job breaking him. How long you been riding him?"

"Two years," she said, turning to get on. "Could I give you a lift?"

"No."

And now looking down at him she asked, "Who was it you shot?"

"Shot?"

"Over in the timber a while ago. You didn't fire four times just at Crunch's horse."

"I don't know," Noland said. "I don't know who it was."

He turned abruptly and headed across the yard, walking straight with an effort, like a man on the way to his hanging.

He knew after a while that Janice was following him, but he didn't look back as he made his way into the timber. He skirted the dead horse and the stench of the sheep very widely, and finally made his way into the

cedars and peered dazedly over the bluff.

He was too weary even to be surprised as he saw Baily down there, his humorous little eyes wide open, his thatch of red hair moving in a current of air. His body was twisted grotesquely—and on his feet were a pair of boots with the soles built down to make a woman's tracks. But they were not the same boots as those he had found.

Noland had forgotten Janice until a choked sound of surprise came from her.

Then Crunch Malone called, "Ed? Wher' you all at, Ed? Oh, Lord, my pore ol' pony—"

Noland moved back to the cattle trail. Crunch was skirting the dead horse. Now he saw Noland and he said, "Ed, I wanted to tell you I'll do anything to make it right about that pipe."

Wanting to give him a scare that would last, Noland grunted, not too cheerfully. "We'll settle that later."

Crunch said, "I sure hate it, Ed. I—I was comin' up to ast you all to our party. Nora an' Lonnie Tabor got married this mawnin' an' we're aimin' to have a hell of—I mean—" he looked sheepishly at Janice, "we're aimin' to have a big blow-out next Wednesday night for 'em." He cleared his throat. "You know—everybody sort of bring somethin' to he'p set up housekeepin'—" And as Noland stared at him he added, "Kinda funny. Lonnie, he's been pesterin' her to marry him an' she wouldn't—they been kinda sparkin', you know—an' this mawnin', Lonnie he come along, an' Nora up an' ast him did he still want to marry her an' he was so addled all he could say was wait till he went home an' put on his suit."

NOLAND felt an irritation in spite of himself. He was glad to be rid of his obligation to her, but it was a bit galling to have her take that Tabor kid in preference to himself.

He said offhandedly, "Well, good luck to them, Crunch. I'll send another horse down and some men to help with the burning, and we've got to stretch four-five miles of wire to keep the cattle clear to hell away—" Now he looked at Janice and changed that to, "—to keep the cattle down off this whole corner till next year. And we got to beat the brush for more sheep. And I'll send another horse—I guess I said that, didn't I? The body of the man that was leading your pony is down over the bluff there. Baily."

"Baily?" Crunch exclaimed. "And he still owes me for wreckin' them tanks—" He clapped his hands over his mouth as if to force back the words he had said. "I mean—well, he made me do it, but—"

Noland said, "Baily? I thought you meant you did it for Porter—"

"Oh, Lord, no," Crunch said patiently. "Baily was doin' it so's you'd shoot Porter. An' I figgered 'twould be a good thing if you was to shoot 'im, or I'd never've helped out," he added ingratiatingly. "He wanted to get rid of Porter an' take over Porter's share of their cattle an' land. He was tryin' to get your lease, too, I reckon, way he talked when he was drunk—but I was aimin' to tell you about that's so's you could take keer of him *too.*"

Crunch paused to see what effect his words were having. And if the man was telling anywhere near as much of the truth as Noland thought, he guessed Baily was crazy. Only a crazy man would bring in foot and mouth disease to kill out the cattle so he could have the ravished land for horses.

Crisply he said, "I'll take up your case later, Crunch."

He slogged wearily down the cattle path. He heard Janice whistle at her horse and he heard her walking behind him.

He said, "I'm sorry Porter turned out to be such a louse."

She answered, "He's not quite the louse I thought he was. I thought he was the one killed Pop—" She hesitated. "Did you notice Baily's boots?"

"Yes. I'd been tracking him."

"I found a pair made like them about a month ago crossing Porter's range. I lost a cuff link in some chaparral. I got down to hunt it, and my horse started eating out of an old hay stack. It was mostly weeds and had been salted, I reckon, to make the cattle eat it. Anyhow, he was mashing down the poles to get to it—and when I went to get him away he'd pulled out a boot made like Baily's. I found the other. I—I went back later to hunt my cuff link—and then I got to thinking if I talked with Burt—he might let something slip about those boots if I handled it right. They were too small for him, but he had such a mean eye I thought he might have hired whoever wore them when Pop—"

Her mouth was trembling now. She said, "Beat me, if you think I need it, but be friends with me. Let me go with you."

"I don't want to be friends with you," Noland told her. "If that's as far as it can go, I want to get away from here and forget you. I can't get you out of my mind."

He caught her and kissed her mouth cruelly and thrust her away. He said, "That's the way I want you, and to hell with being friends. I want to marry you. I love you!"

Janice's gray eyes searched his. "You—you said I'm the big boss around here now?"

"Yes."

She took a deep breath. She said, "Noland, kiss me again—and don't make it such a quick one this time."

THE END

THE DEVIL'S CROSSROADS

By JIMMY NICHOLS

IT WAS a long lantern-jawed face with a yellowish tinge to the skin. The little eyes were sunk in pockets of sagging flesh, and a twisted scar, like a fork of chain lightning, zigzagged down the left cheek. Over the thin lips was a short hairline mustache. Molly Marks never forgot that face. She was to remember it for the rest of her life.

She had only seen it once, and that had been in flickering firelight, twelve years ago. Yet it was as bright before her in all its evil as when she had first seen it. She shuddered a little, then she whipped up her two bay horses and the heavy wagon rolled forward once more over the desert. The face was not in Goldfield, Texas lay ahead.

"Ma," her twelve-year-old son spoke from the wagon seat beside her. "Ma, will we ever stop traveling and settle down like real folks?"

Molly felt with her toes for the rifle on the floor under the seat. "I'm looking for somebody, son. When I find him, we'll settle down."

Timmy had been just a baby—three months old—on that horrible night when she and Ed had camped their wagon on the outskirts of Virginia City. They were young then, and very happy.

Ed was stirring up a campfire while she sat in the wagon crooning to the baby. Suddenly, as the flames leaped upward, a short man with an ugly, scarred face walked swiftly from behind the wagon and thrust something against Ed's ribs.

"I'll take that cash, merchant man!" he said softly. She stared as Ed raised his hands and the gunman rifled his pockets of their year's earnings. As he stuffed the last greenback into his own belt, he stepped back and fired twice. Ed pitched forward into the fire.

Then Molly screamed. The man jumped around, startled. He had not seen her sitting in the wagon. Witnesses were bad business and the men of Virginia City would revenge a widow. Swiftly, he raised his gun again.

Molly stopped screaming. Somehow, she raised the reins in one hand and the whip in the other, and the horses plunged forward.

She returned at daylight to learn that Ed was dead. She described the man with the scarred face, but no one had ever heard of him. That was the beginning of a twelve-year search by Molly Marks for her husband's murderer.

But even in the thinly-scattered Southwest, the quest was difficult. Molly and her son wandered in the wagon from town to town, selling pots and pans and always looking. Austin was her first stop in Texas.

The great bays were getting older now, and panting in the Texas sun. Molly pulled up to a watering trough in the shade of a wooden building and flung the reins to the ground. The horses thrust their long, silvering heads into the trough and drank eagerly. Timmy climbed off the wagon and sat on the sidewalk.

Suddenly a scorpion thrust its tail into the belly of the off horse. Stung, the animal screamed and plunged forward against the harness. Then the two bolted down the dusty street toward the crossroads up ahead. Molly, thrown off balance, pitched into the dust just as she saw a man start across the road.

"Look out!" she shouted. "Runaways!"

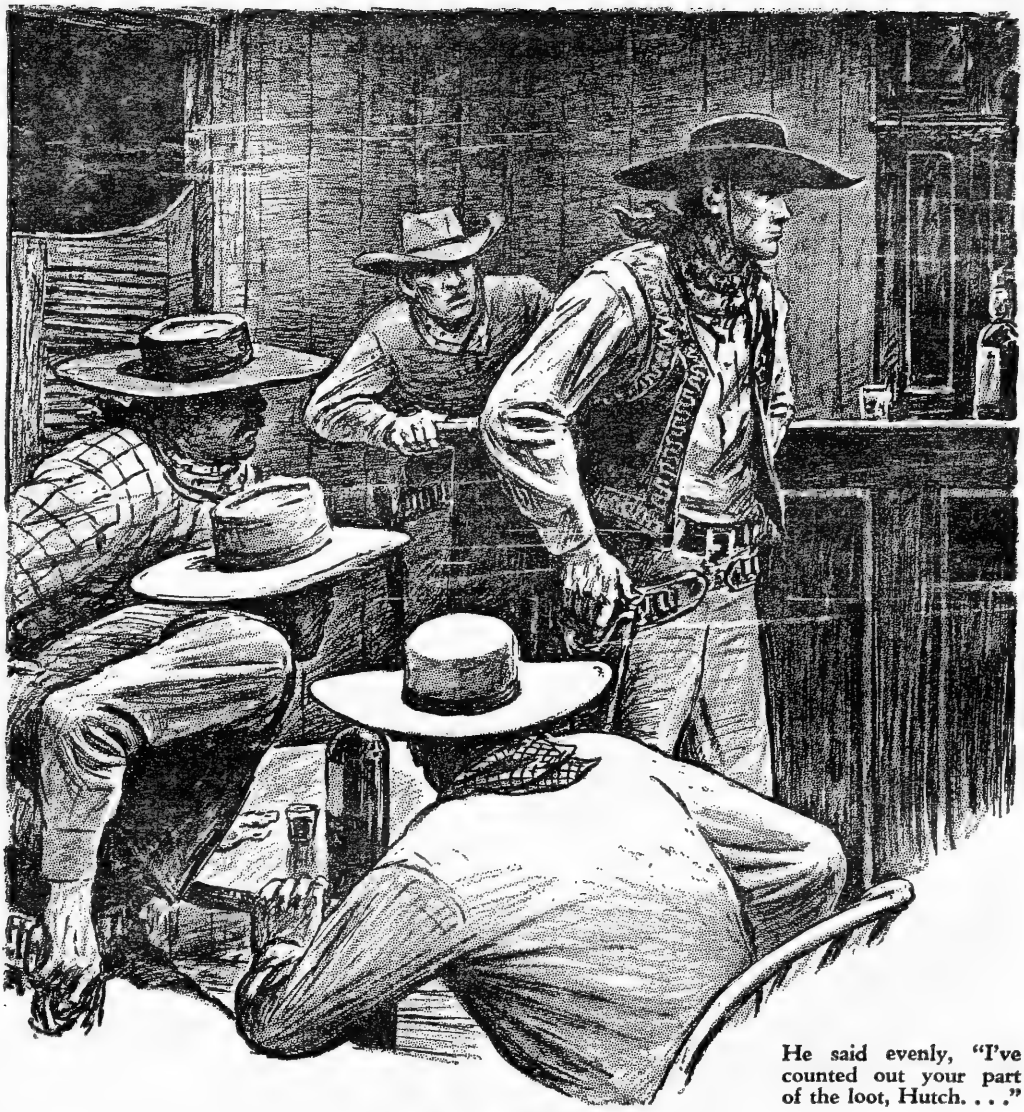
The man looked, lost his head, and began to run down the street. Molly covered her face with her apron as the team knocked him down, trampled him and dragged the wagon wheels over him. Molly picked herself up and ran to the victim. He was mangled and lay face down in his blood. She forced herself to turn him over. Then she stared quietly.

There, grinning the smashed grin of violent death, was the unmistakable scarred face of her husband's murderer. Molly picked herself up and walked back to where Timmy was standing, frightened, by the curb.

"Do you like it here in Austin, son?"

"Yes, ma," he said bewilderedly.

"Well, I've found the man I was looking for. I guess we'll settle down, now," said Molly Marks.



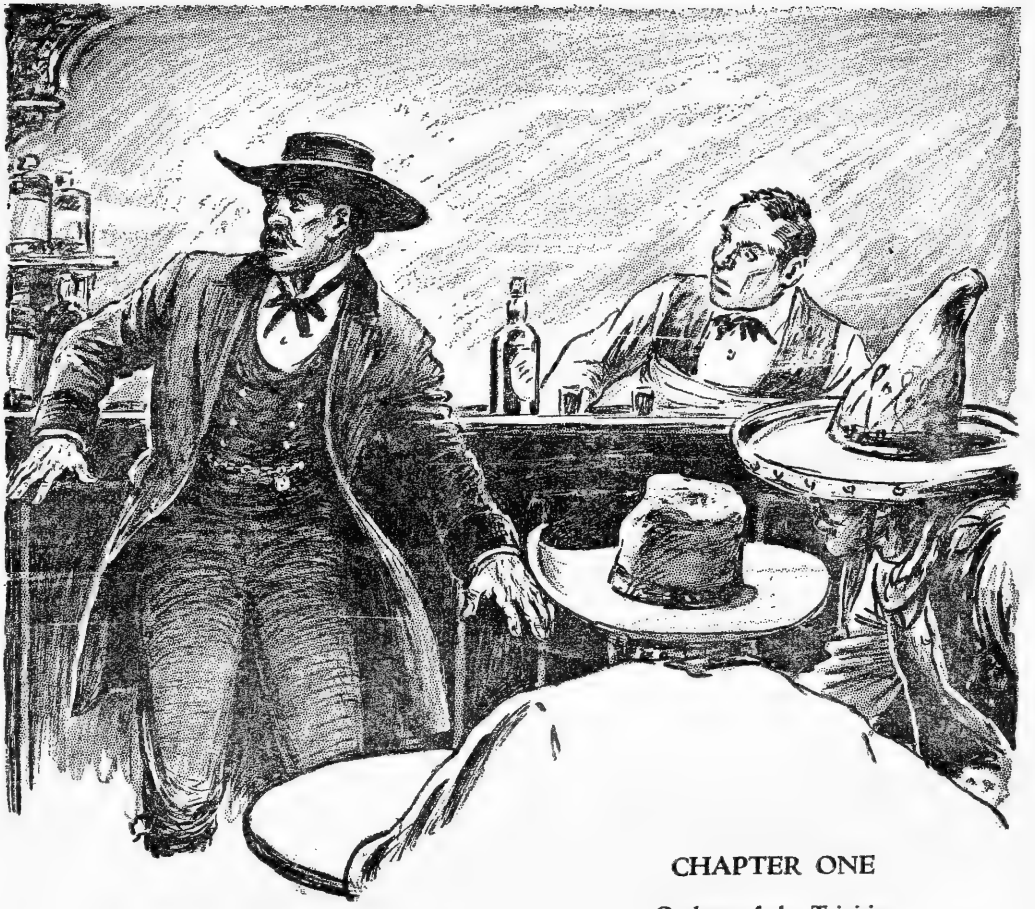
He said evenly, "I've counted out your part of the loot, Hutch. . . ."

THE LAST OUTLAW

Dramatic Novelette
Of A No-Surrender Owlhoot Clan

By

WILLIAM BENTON JOHNSTON



The ghosts of a betrayed longrider band rose silently from unmarked graves that red night and stood in the shadowed street of Mesa Grande. With dead hands, ice-cold guts and silent guns, they backed a gallant owlhoot king who made his fighting man's gamble against Hell!

CHAPTER ONE

Outlaws of the Trinities

BENEATH the high stars, night lay across the lower Trinities in a smother of blackness. The solitary rider, walking his horse up the dry bed of Layton's Creek, threw away his cigarette, and its tip burst into a shower of sparks against the invisible earth.

Presently from out that darkness a voice challenged, *"Quien es?"*

The rider drew rein. "It's Sheriff Hutch Oldham. I'm looking for Sam Stockton. Is that you, Miguel?"

"Sí, señor. Trouble?"

Oldham chuckled. "Not this time."

There was brief silence, then Miguel said, "Leave your horse here. Joe will go up to the cave with you."

Oldham dismounted. A hand touched his arm and guided him along the creek bed.

"Duck your head, Sheriff," Joe said after a while, "here's the entrance."

The two crouched and felt their way along the narrow passage that presently made a sharp turn to the right.

Old Tom Williams, on interior guard, called

out, "Who's that? Straighten up and let's have a gander at you!"

Joe said, "It's Sheriff Oldham. He wants to see Sam."

Williams let down the hammer of his Sharps rifle.

Farther on, where the passage broadened into the cave proper, a pine branch fire threw an ever-changing pattern of light and shadow against the walls. Around this fire were members of the band known as The Dark Angels.

A slender girl, in boots and short doeskin skirt, stood at the fire's yonder edge. Her hair fell black and shiny across her shoulders and her bright silk shirt was open low at the neck, revealing the deep valley between high, firm breasts. A violin was tucked beneath her chin and she danced the bow merrily across the strings.

Behind her, a lanky boy with a shock of unruly yellow hair sang:

"It rained all night the day I left,
The weather it was dry.
Sun so hot I froze to death,
Susannah, don't you cry."

A squat, swarthy Italian in faded levis got up and, smiling gently, took bow and violin from the girl's hands. For a brief interval he stood there, staring at the fire. Then he lifted the instrument and began to play. Music rose and fell, light and airy, abruptly turning sombre and melancholy, gradually quickening and brightening again: a tone picture of dancers swirling about the streets of a village in far off Sicily, of a funeral procession passing and stilling the merriment, of tolling bells and, finally, of the dancers going back to their dancing, as dancers will.

"What is it? What is he playing?" Sheriff Oldham asked.

Williams shook his head. "I don't know. Funny thing. Where other tunes make a man tap his foot, that there music makes his heart swell up, like maybe he was a-fixing to cry." He raised his voice. "Hey, Sam, here's Hutch Oldham, wanting to have a confab with you."

The music stopped instantly. The Italian and the girl faded silently back into the deeper shadows. No one else moved except Sam Stockton, who turned his head, showing Oldham a faint, enigmatic smile.

"Come on up to the fire, Sheriff," he said. "What's on your mind?"

Oldham walked closer. There was a gallon jug of tequila on a low, outcropping ledge. He lifted the jug and uncorked it.

"Just a little business, Sam," he raised the jug and drank deeply, "and maybe a mite of pleasure, too."

Around the fire there were sounds of laughter, but Stockton's cryptic smile remained.

"Put on the coffee pot, Dolores," he called. "The sheriff's going to stay a while."

Oldham sat down, his back against a boulder. "No news in town," he announced, "except I heard you fellows had made a little raid somewhere south of the Border—and that might have been just talk."

Sam, absorbed in fashioning a cigarette, passed this without comment. An aged Mexican woman came from the back of the cave with coffee pot and tin cups. She raked out coals and set up the pot.

Sam said, "Thanks, Dolores," and the old woman smiled at him, then went back beyond the perimeter of the fire's yellow light.

"You didn't ride all the way up here, Sheriff," Sam reminded Oldham, "for a drink of tequila."

"The little business I spoke about?" Oldham asked.

Sam nodded and lighted his cigarette. Oldham ran a glance at the others about the fire, this glance returning to Sam and placing upon him a wordless question.

"Go ahead," Sam told him. "There are no secrets among us; what one knows all of us know. That's why this band has held together so long. We agree on everything before we do it, then win or lose we share and share alike."

OLDHAM got out his pipe and filled it. The coffee had come to a quick boil, spreading its fragrance throughout the cave. Camita Maderos, the girl who had played the violin, emerged from the shadows, filling the cups and passing them to the men. There was one cup larger than the others and she gave this to Oldham with grave courtesy. When she approached Sam, their glances met and held briefly. Camita's eyes turned very soft. A secret, gentle smile came to her lips. She said, barely audibly, "I love you," and passed on to pour coffee into another cup.

Oldham smoked his pipe and drank the coffee. Presently he said, "You fellows have been up here in the Trinities for a long time. I ain't bothered you and you've kept most of your raids outside my territory. Good, stiff rewards are posted for some of you, still I've left you alone."

In the shadows, the Sabine Kid laughed derisively. A dark flush spread across Oldham's cheeks, but his talk ran on smoothly.

"I'll admit," he conceded, "that I ain't never had enough men to tackle the Angels, or a posse with guts enough to do it. But the point I'm making is that I ain't even *tried*. Last election there was talk of voting me out because I didn't bring you fellows in, but we've always been friends, in a way. I've brought you tips on a few deals and you've cut

me in for my share—and nobody's ever suspicioned a thing. I've shot square with you and you've shot square with me."

Sam nodded and a murmur of assent ran through the men.

"And now," the sheriff said, "I've got something big—and easy as getting an Apache drunk."

He paused and knocked out his pipe. Stockton waited, asking no question and evincing no particular interest.

"Meyers and Zimmerman," Oldham went on, "are moving a shipment of nuggets and dust East, instead of to Frisco—*by way of Mesa Grande.*" He waited a moment for this information to lay its full significance upon his listeners. "There's been a lot of trouble on the westward trails; too many shipments have been lost in hold-ups. So Meyers thought of slipping a load through to the East direct, figuring it safer because nobody would expect such a thing in time to plan a robbery.

"The gold's in a special-built iron box with a big inset lock. They sneaked it out of Northcut last night in a wagon and it's in the Wells Fargo safe in Mesa Grande, right now. They came to me for help with their scheme and I've got special guards posted around the office."

Sam stood up and stretched. "That Wells Fargo safe is too big and too tough to be blown, and you know it, Hutch."

"We won't have to blow it," Oldham assured him, "or fire a single shot. Look." He squatted and brushed off a place on the cave's sandy floor. "Here's the street and here's the Wells Fargo office. They're going to keep the safe locked until just before the stage leaves Wednesday morning. Old Man Lattimer is going to open it then and I'll be in the office to protect him—*just me and Lattimer, with all the doors locked.*

"I'll have a shotgun guard across the street in the room over Pogue's Restaurant, one in front of Warren's Hardware and another at Wright's Harness Shop." He indicated these places with marks on his sand map. "Verd Martin will be here in the alley, guarding the back of the office—he's the only one who'll have to be in on the deal."

CHAPTER TWO

The Passing Bell

OLDHAM sat back and filled his pipe again. "All you boys have to do is come up the alley and Verd will be waiting for you to tie him up, gag him and put him in the woodshed back of the office. Then throw a pebble against the window and I'll crack Lattimer on the head with a Colt. When he comes to, me and him will both be tied up and gagged, and he'll never know how it happened. By the time the stage rolls up and they finally break down the door to see what's the matter, you'll have the box well on the way up here."

That was Hutch Oldham's speech and now that he had made it he got up, crossed to the ledge and took another drink of tequila, leaving the Angels alone with their discussion.

Sam considered the proposition, long training in trouble constraining his mind to a meticulous and diligent search for hidden and treacherous angles. Carefully he rechecked and evaluated all that Oldham had said, finding no inconsistencies and nothing particularly implausible or suspicious. He looked at his men and nodded his head, seeing their unspoken but unanimous agreement to that nod.

Oldham had one more card and he played it now. "There's near two hundred thousand in that box, and I want a fifth. I'll have to pay Verd Martin out of my share, and I'll have to do some good acting and tall lying."

The Sabine Kid, standing back of Sam, whistled. "Jumping cactus—two hundred thousand!"

That was the only comment until Sam said, "I think a fifth is fair enough, Hutch." Again he glanced at his men and, as before, there was no dissenting sign or word.

"Then it's a deal?" Oldham asked.

Sam Stockton was a young man, yet smoky years had seasoned him and given him a constant, deep-grained wariness. Back of him lay a double-cross and its consequent term in Yuma Prison and after that the persecutions which finally drove him to the rimrocks. All this was a part of him and it put its weight against any hasty decision.

"I'll call in the guards and talk it over with them," he told Oldham. "Miguel will ride into town at noon tomorrow. If he stops at Warren's for a box of .45 cartridges, you can count us in. If he rides on and hitches at Brandon's rack, you'll know we won't be with you."

Oldham said, "Good," and took a final drink from the tequila jug.

Sam walked with him to the cave exit and watched Joe take him through the narrow passage and out into the night.

Sam turned back to the fire, said to the Italian, "Mario, you and the Kid relieve Miguel and Joe—let them come in and talk this over."

Now that the sheriff was gone, the Angels' taciturnity dropped away; their questions and comments rose in a swirl of talk. Presently the guards came in, had their coffee and tequila and added their voices to the discussion.

After a long while, Sam said, "We agree that the deal looks all right and sounds all

right, but there's been a demand on Hutch for a long time to bring us in, dead or alive, and he's an ambitious man."

The tall, thin Englishman known only as Doc, ran long fingers over his scant, graying hair. "And never trust an ambitious man, Sam—never."

"That's right," Sam agreed. "Further, there must be around twenty thousand in rewards for the Kid, Tom Williams and you and me, Doc. Hutch would do almost anything for that kind of money."

Impartially he tested the other extremes of the Angels' opinions. First he turned to the Sabine Kid, "What do you say?"

Recklessness showed across the Kid's features in a fierce sweep. "Hell, we can handle anything that comes up. Let's try it."

"And you," Sam then asked remote, cautious old Tom Williams, "do you think it a risk worth taking?"

"Maybe," Tom replied thoughtfully. "But first let's send some of the boys not known in Mesa Grande to do a lot of looking and listening."

So the decision was made. One by one the Dark Angels took up their blankets and drifted away until only Sam and Camita, Doc and Tom Williams were left by the dying fire.

MINUTES built up into a long silence. Finally Sam stirred, said, "We've been in the rimrocks a long time, long enough for our luck to run out any day. The country is being settled fast. Men are bringing in their wives, building churches and schools . . . the old lawless days are almost over."

He expressed a thought that lay constantly in the minds of his listeners and they knew the exact truth of his words.

"But this," he told them, "may be the chance to change all that—the chance for us to break up and each have enough money to go his way and find a new life in some other place."

Camita said quickly, "It could mean that for us, Sam—for you and me." She moved closer, leaning over to put one hand on the cave floor so that she looked directly up into his face.

Sam saw the fine sheen of her hair against the dim firelight, saw the excitement in her dark eyes and the soft, maturing beauty of her body. He was moved, as he always was, at her closeness, and his emotions this night were deep and disturbing. He thought bitterly of how incongruous it was for her to be here, her companions an infamous band of outlaws.

Camita Maderos, born in a house of many servants and educated in the convents of Spain, who had seen her father and mother murdered by land thieves and who had fled southern California, endangered by a like fate only because she was legally heiress to a great estate there. Sam put aside these dark thoughts and listened to Camita.

"I know where we could go. It is a village south of Hermosilla, a quiet place, my love, and in the mornings birds sing and it is cool, for then there is always a small breeze. There are houses with patios and green grass and red roses; fat, lazy pigeons walk about in the streets. There is an old, old mission, and when the bells ring out the evening Angelus it is peaceful and sweet and beautiful as heaven itself.

"After Wednesday we can go there, Sam—we can, can't we?"

Sam smiled at her. "We'll see," he said.

Camita's words moved the Englishman. He stood up, and now quite drunk, he swayed unsteadily.

"Sam's right," he announced, with slow, measured precision. "Wednesday could well be fraught with meaning for all of us."

A far memory touched him and he stared across the fire with a gaze that went beyond this cave in the Trinities; went across mountain and plain and sea, on and on to where the Dover cliffs lifted above the waters of the English Channel. He had a vision and he put it into words, quoting softly:

"On either side the river lie
Long fields of barley and of rye,
That clothe the world and meet the sky;
And through the field the road runs by
To many-tower'd Camelot. . . ."

He broke off abruptly and went stumblingly across the cave, memories of England—and the sudden hope of seeing it again—strong upon him.

Tom Williams palmed a live coal into the bowl of his pipe. "It's mighty nice to talk of going off somewhere and living peaceful," he said unemotionally, "but it don't never turn out like that. Ill-gotten gains never make a man's dreams come true; in the end they don't never do anybody any good. You can't no more expect peace and happiness out of such spoils than you can expect to grow corn on a palo verde tree or pick peaches off a sahuaro. Money and what it will buy just makes it harder, for the more good things a man has, the more he hates to give 'em up. So he begins to get scared of dying, because he's got so much to live for.

"For folks like us, things won't never change until that day when the violence we've used turns on us and makes us die as we've lived. What's the other poetry Doc sometimes spouts off . . . about the passing bell?"

Sam said, "It's something like this:

'And so he lived and so he fell,
A victim of self-chosen fray.
Now echoes but the passing bell,
That marked his funeral yesterday.'"

"Yeah," Tom told him. "That's the way it's always been, Sam, and that's how it always will be—and I reckon it would be plumb awful to be real bad scared when that day finally comes."

Camita's eyes were wide and frightened. "No, Tom—no! It will not be like that for Sam and me. We'll go to that village below the Border and we'll be happy. Our children will grow up and be happy, too, and God will forgive us. We will go, won't we, Sam? Promise me that we will?"

Sam rose, took her hand lifted her up. "We'll see," he said again, and led her across the cave to where she and old Dolores slept.

He watched her take off her boots, then he pulled up one of the blankets and tucked it about her shoulders. Kneeling beside her, he kissed her, said, "Goodnight, Camita."

She flung her arms out of the blanket and held him in a close embrace.

"You are my life," she whispered, "and nothing shall separate us—ever. Lie still and you can feel my heart beat against your heart. As long as one beats, the other shall beat. When one stops, the other shall stop also. Every day and every hour that's the way our loves goes on and on and nothing can change it, Sam—nothing."

When the next day's noon sun threw its brassy glare down upon Mesa Grande, Miguel rode in along the town's one street. He left his horse in front of Warren's Hardware and went inside.

Two men were intent upon a game of checkers, and Sheriff Hutch Oldham sat on a nail keg and watched them. Phil Warren left his desk and walked up to the front of the store.

"A box of .45s, please, señor—for the peestol," Miguel said distinctly.

Immediately upon Miguel's departure, Oldham left Warren's and crossed the dusty, sun-baked street to his office, where Verd Martin, chief deputy, and Sid Lattimer, of Wells Fargo, were awaiting him. There was a crafty smile on Oldham's face.

"We've got 'em," he told Martin and Lattimer. "By God, we've finally got 'em!"

CHAPTER THREE

Song of the Violin

WHILE dawn of Wednesday morning was yet a faint grayness against the distant Sahwaves, the Dark Angels rode down from the Trinities in two groups to rendezvous for final instruction in a gulch three miles north of Mesa Grande.

The first group was horseback: Mario, Jenkins, Rand, Wesson and Hess. The identities of these were unknown to the citizens of Mesa Grande and thus they were to be the vanguard. The other group came to the gulch in a buckboard—Sam, Doc and old Tom Williams.

For two days Rand and Wesson had reconnoitered Mesa Grande, drinking at the Palace, walking the street and loafiing on the porch of Brandon's Hotel. These two were new to the band, but they were shrewd, experienced men, yet they found nothing to arouse suspicion. The guards were posted as Oldham said they would be. There was no discernible movement on or beneath the town's surface, or in the sheriff's personal activities, to indicate plan or trap.

That was the report Rand and Wesson turned in. "We'll bet our lives on it," Wesson added.

"That's exactly what you're doing," Sam said flatly.

This report was reassuring, yet Sam's habitual caution impelled him to send in today's vanguard against any exigencies which might arise, by chance or design.

"You fellows go on in," he told the mounted party. "Mario, you hang around the front of Pogue's Restaurant, and about thirty minutes before stage time get the crowd to listening to your fiddle. Keep an eye on the street, the buildings—everything. If it looks good, play the merry, dancing part of that tune of yours. The minute anything suspicious shows up, shift to the mournful part that sounds like tolling bells. Watch sharp, for we're depending on that music to tell us if everything is all right along the street."

Mario grinned, his perfect teeth a white flash against his dark skin. "The music, she will all be gay, I think—I have the hunch everything is going off good and smooth. Yes, good and smooth."

Mario's confidence irritated Tom Williams, for there was upon the old man this morning a strong premonition of disaster. He shrugged lean shoulders.

"Follow hunches in this business," he said dourly, "and you'll wind up in Boothill with a belly full of lead. Watch close and keep that fiddle talking—to hell with the hunches!"

Mario's band broke up and approached Mesa Grande from different directions: Jenkins and Rand from the north, Wesson and Hess from the south and Mario, himself, by the old Leed Creek trail. By the time they reached town, heat of advancing day was beginning to make itself felt and people moved about the street, bent on business of the morning.

Into these activities, the vanguard of the Angels moved unobtrusively. Mario left his horse at the Palace hitchrack and went inside for a drink, after which he idled along to Warren's Hardware. He sat on the bench in front of the store and waited like that, his violin case beside him.

Jenkins and Rand stepped down from their saddles at Brandon's Hotel, stood for a brief interval of talk, then took chairs on the hotel porch. At the other end of the street, Wesson and Hess dropped reins in front of the blacksmith shop and went inside to inquire about having their horses shod. Later they came out and squatted in the shade of the juniper tree at the shop's side, staying close to the Winchesters in their saddle scabbards and showing the street a deceptively casual interest.

A freight wagon was being unloaded at the Emporium, and in front of Wright's Harness Shop a Diamond-Over-Diamond rider was adjusting a new saddle to the back of his horse. A slender man in black broadcloth pushed through the batwing doors of the Palace and crossed to Pogue's Restaurant, pausing enroute to show bold attention to a comely Mexican girl carrying her basket of clothes toward the river. Brandon and two drummers came out to the hotel porch and stood there, enjoying their after-breakfast cigars.

After a while, Sheriff Oldham and Lattimer left the hotel and walked along to the Wells Fargo office, entered and closed the door. The guard in the room above Pogue's flipped a cigarette stub out the window and his compadre, posted at the harness shop, idly watched the Diamond-over-Diamond man count out money to Wright for the saddle. The other guard sat on the bench with Mario in front of Warren's Hardware.

ALL these things were in themselves amorphous, but Mario took each one and put it in its place, and a complete picture thereby took on shape and meaning. This whole picture he considered, and was satisfied with. He took his violin from its case and began tuning. The guard gave this proceeding a mild interest and several passers-by stopped and waited. Mario lifted the violin and music, light and airy, ran along the street.

Back of the Wells Fargo office, Sam Stockton heard the merry lilt of that tune. He left Tom Williams to guard the buckboard and, followed by Doc, moved boldly and unhurriedly up the alley.

Verd Martin, on guard at the rear of the office, stood beside the woodshed, his back to the alley.

Sam unholstered his Colt, said, "All right, fellow, walk through that woodshed door—and no foolishness."

Martin instantly stepped inside the shed. "Tie me up and get it over with," he whispered. "Everything's all right."

Doc did a swift, expert job with rope and gag, then shoved Martin over so that he lay on the shed floor, his face away from the door. Doc straightened up and he and Sam stood there, listening. Mario's violin still sang its gay song. Whereupon Sam picked up a pebble and flipped it against the office window. There was a moment of delay, then the back door opened. Sam and Doc went inside.

Oldham stood in the middle of the room, revolver drawn, and Sid Lattimer lay on the floor back of the desk, his white hair spoltched with a spot of crimson. The big Wells Fargo safe was unlocked, its door ajar.

"I tapped him while he was opening the safe," Oldham explained. "He'll be all right after a while. The lick wasn't too hard, but it was hard enough for him never to know who or what hit him. Now tie us up, take the box and get the hell out of here."

Doc attended to binding and gagging Lattimer while Sam and Oldham dragged the heavy box from the safe. Oldham found the key to the box and gave it to Sam.

"Get it up to the cave and wait for me," Oldham said. "If I'm not there by five o'clock, open it and count aside my share—I trust you to count fair."

Sam put the key to the strong-box in his pocket and helped Doc tie Oldham's hands and feet.

"Now hit *me* over the head to make it look right," the sheriff told Sam. "Go ahead, hit me."

Sam lifted his gun and rapped Oldham so smartly across the forehead that a rivulet of blood ran down to the bridge of his nose.

"Good," Oldham whispered. He held open his mouth to receive Doc's gag and then rolled over and lay beside the still form of Lattimer.

Quickly Sam and Doc dragged the box to the back door. It was too heavy for them to carry and Sam opened the door to signal Tom Williams to bring the buckboard closer.

It taxed the full strength of the three men to load the box. Doc, panting a little, said, "A lot of gold, Sam—a lot of gold."

Sam covered the box with loose hay and Williams spoke to his team. The buckboard rolled along the valley and out of Mesa Grande, the horses restrained to a moderate pace. And all the while violin music floated along the town's single street, music gay and lively and untouched by any melancholy note.

The buckboard was in the foothills when Wesson and Hess overtook it.

"Went off without a hitch," was Wesson's laconic comment.

Later, Jenkins and Rand showed up.

"They finally broke down the door and

found Oldham and the agent," Rand reported.

The group was climbing into the Trinities when Mario joined them. He was elated. "Like taking the candy from a bambino. Everybody is excited and trying to form a posse, but Oldham, he tell them not to worry, he will handle everything." Mario laughed uproarously. "That sheriff, he is some pumpkin!"

AT LAYTON'S CREEK other members of the band were waiting for the buckboard. There Williams rested his horses while Mario recounted the easy success of the fray and raked aside the hay to display the iron box.

Camita stood apart from the others, her attention focused upon Sam to the exclusion of all else. He saw her face was pale and that she held herself a little too rigidly erect. He stepped down from the buckboard immediately and went to her. She put out her hand and touched his arm and they stood like that, listening to the others talk, their own thoughts too closely attuned for any need of words.

Tom Williams' premonition of trouble still clung darkly in his mind. "Damn all this jabber," he said irritably, "let's get the box up to the cave."

"Take Camita's horse," Sam told Jenkins. "We're going to walk."

Camita smiled. "That's exactly what I wanted to do—but it is a dangerous thing to read a woman's mind so accurately, Sam."

After the others had gone, they went leisurely up the dry creek bed.

"Something's bothering you," Sam said. "What's wrong?"

Her quick laughter touched the stillness like a silver chime. "Nothing, my love—nothing in all the world is wrong, now that you are back and safe." Her merriment faded to a gentle gravity. She walked along a few steps, then said, "The night you found me, lost and cold and hungry, there was nothing for me except a great, empty loneliness, nothing to worry about, nothing to be afraid of—nothing. I was dead, but knowing you and loving you has brought me back to life. And now there is much to worry about and to be afraid of."

"I know," he assured her. "That night brought me back to life, too. When I rode up to the cave with you in my arms I had come to the end of my rope. There wasn't anything left for me—nothing I could expect and nothing I wanted. Since then it's been different, a lot different."

She stopped, said, "Sam," and he wheeled about and took her in his arms and kissed her.

Presently they walked on and after a while she said, "When the gold has been divided let's take our share and ride south tonight. Let's not wait until tomorrow, let's not wait a single hour. Let's ride until midnight, then spread our blankets beneath the stars—just you and me. Tomorrow we can go on, riding when we please, stopping when we please, loving each other and saying all the things we've never quite dared to say before."

Eagerness brightened her eyes and showed further in the urgency of her manner.

"We'll be riding by sundown," he promised, "and when finally we come to Hermosilla, we'll be married at the mission, then go on down to your village."

"It's a beginning of happiness, Sam," she told him breathlessly, "and an ending of all the old, dark sorrows."

When they came to the cave, the buckboard had been hidden and Miguel and Joe were on guard. Sam and Camita went inside to find a fire lighted and the band gathered around the box, waiting to see the gold weighed and divided.

"It's after five o'clock and Oldham hasn't showed up," Hess reminded Sam. "Let's count out his share and put it aside for him."

Sam nodded and took from his pocket the big key Hutch Oldham had given him.

"Here," he said to Camita, "we'll let you be the one to open it."

She took the key and fitted it into the lock.

"Wait," Sam told her. "This is a big moment for all of us, and Joe and Miguel will want to be in on it. I'll go out and take their place—don't open it until they get here."

Going into the cave's exit, he heard Doc say, "Sam's a gentleman, such consideration of others is proof of it."

"Hell" interposed the Sabine Kid, "I thought a gent was an hombre wearing a beaver hat and a gold watch chain."

"You leave thinking alone," Doc retorted. "All your brains are in your trigger finger; you wouldn't know a cockney beggar from the Prince of Wales."

Grinning, Sam went through the narrow passage and out into the late afternoon sun. He relieved Joe and Miguel and after these two were gone he relaxed, smoking and watching the trail below. Slowly tension of the day drained out of his mind and muscles.

He was like that when the explosion shook the earth and the sound of it, muffled and ominous, rolled down to the creek to echo and re-echo against the canyon walls.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Man Called Sheriff Oldham

FOR a long moment Sam sat perfectly still, the significance of this rumbling lost to him. Then he leaped to his feet and ran up

the trail. Loosened boulders were rolling down the slope and a saffron dust haze rose slowly on the still air. Not until he reached the cave entrance did he realize fully what had happened. The passage was blocked by fallen rock and through this crept tendrils of dark, acrid smoke.

Sam Stockton felt an interval of panic. Frantically he began digging into the debris blocking the passage; wildly he called out to Camita and Mario and Tom Williams. But from the cave came only silence and the seep of blasting powder fumes.

Sam's irrational moment passed. Long training in trouble asserted itself and calmed him, honing all his perceptions to a razor-sharp edge. Thus it was that he heard from afar the unmistakable *click* of a shod hoof against stone. Quickly he slipped from boulder to boulder up to the ledge above the entrance of the cave.

From this point of vantage he watched the valley below and presently saw two riders scale the rocky slope, leave their horses above Layton's Creek and approach the cave on foot. As they drew nearer, he identified Oldham and Verd Martin.

To Sam the swift, shocking violence of the explosion was still a mystery, yet there was gathering in his mind an awful suspicion, and this held him to a quiet watching as Martin and the sheriff approached. They came on warily until at last Oldham saw the wrecked, boulder-sealed cave entrance.

His voice rose then in triumph. "Come on, Verd. We've got 'em—all of 'em—like a bunch of rats in a deadfall." His laughter rang in the silence.

"Deadfall is right," Martin called back, his voice high-pitched with excitement. "Ain't nothing that could have lived through a blast of that much powder."

Oldham had to savor his triumph, had to pause and drink deep of it and put it into exultant words.

"Brains did it," he boasted to Martin. "A little good acting and careful planning and I've done what a posse of a hundred couldn't have done—I've got the Dark Angels, every damned one of 'em."

"And we'll soon have the reward money," Martin reminded him. "To think of a smart hombre like Stockton falling for it." He laughed and slapped his leg with his hat. "Him a-thinking he had a chest of gold and all the time it wasn't nothing but a box full of iron washers and blasting powder, with a cocked pistol buried in it and an iron rod hooked around the trigger and fastened to the box top." Martin shook his head. "When they raised the lid, the whole thing must have gone off like a blast of hell itself. It was a quick way to die."

"And I know enough about human curiosity to know all of 'em were gathered close around," Oldham said. "Come on, let's clear away these rocks and have a look at the bodies."

Quietly Sam Stockton rose from behind his sheltering boulder and moved out on the ledge. He slipped his long-barreled Colt from its holster and cocked it. Three careful steps he took, then stopped and stood still.

"I'll wait until the entrance is cleared and then I'll kill them," he decided, his thoughts that coldly calm and practical.

Oldham and Martin moved in beneath the ledge and began clearing away the debris. This day's sun was losing its heat and late afternoon lay quietly over the Trinities. A jackrabbit loped easily across the ledge. From the rocks above a coyote watched the rabbit's progress with avid interest, then slipped silently away to intercept the smaller animal.

Sam stood still as the boulders about him, save that he build up one cigarette, held it unlit in his fingers for a while, then threw it away. Slowly the composite parts of Oldham's trick fitted together in his mind. This turned his anger sharp and merciless, but this was an emotion swiftly lost in the mounting realization that all members of the band except himself were dead.

He thought of the aged Dolores, who had for a long time been like a mother to him, and of Tom Williams, who had been in Yuma Prison with him. He thought of the Sabine Kid's deadly recklessness, of Doc's wistful yearning for England, and of Mario and the soul-stirring music of his violin. He thought, in one deep, all-embracing sense of loss, of the Angels collectively and of the dark and smoky trails he had ridden with them.

Desperately he clung to these thoughts, striving to dull the pain of a greater sorrow by holding against his mind these lesser hurts. But it was an effort not long lived and soon memories of Camita crowded in and possessed him. He saw again her slow, sweet smile and the way her eyes lighted up when she looked at him and said, "I love you, Sam." He remembered, with almost unbearable pain, the softness of her lips and the warm touch of her hands; he remembered her dream of the village which lay south of Hermosilla and where ". . . when bells of the mission ring the evening Angelus it is peaceful and beautiful as heaven itself."

Oldham and Martin abruptly ceased in their labors and came out from beneath the ledge.

"Hell," Oldham said, "we couldn't dig in there in a week. We've got to have tools and a crew of men."

He took out his pipe, filled and lighted it. Verd Martin stood beside him, wiping perspiration from his face with a red bandanna.

And from above, Sam Stockton's looking down upon these two was closely akin to the manner in which the coyote had watched the jack-rabbit pass along the ledge.

Martin said, "I hope the bodies ain't torn up so bad that we'll have trouble identifying 'em to get the reward money." He rubbed his hands together. "After we get it, Hutch, all we'll have to do is give Sid Lattimer a couple of hundred for letting us tie him up and pour a little red ink on his head, then split the balance two ways."

Oldham tapped out his pipe and put it in his pocket.

"*One* way," he said sententiously. "It's too bad that a couple of Angels escaped the blast and hung around to bushwhack us. Yes, sir, it's too bad one of their shots killed you, Verd."

Martin laughed and turned toward the trail. "Didn't none of 'em get away, and I ain't dead, leastwise I don't feel dead."

"You've got no imagination, Verd," Oldham said dryly.

THE import of the sheriff's statement had not for this long moment reached Martin, but now it jerked him around to face Oldham and to see his drawn revolver.

"Killed *me?*" He looked at the sheriff's eyes and his breathing became a short, swift panting. He held both hands out straight in front of his body.

"You can't mean that, not just to keep me from gettiing my part of the reward. Wait, Hutch, I'll—don't, Hutch, for God's sake don't—"

He was like that when Oldham shot him just beneath the heart. Martin's knees bent slowly and he sank face down to the flinty earth, his arms still extended. One convulsive shudder ran through his body, then he drew a deep and final breath. Whereupon Oldham, with cool detachment, took out his pipe and lighted it again.

In that moment Sam Stockton lifted his own revolver and with unhurried deliberation rested it on the boulder before him, aligning the sights squarely upon Oldham's body. As his finger tightened on the trigger, the thought came to him that a bullet snuffing out Hutch Oldham's life would be a punishment quick and merciful out of all proportion to what the man really deserved.

Across this thought swiftly cut the words of old Tom Williams: "The more good things a man has in life, the more he hates to die and leave those things." The implication of this came to Sam full-blown, filling his mind and staying the pressure of his trigger finger. He had a vision of Oldham basking in the luxury of his ill-gotten reward money, and cherishing each hour of such living. This brought to Sam a distinct sense of satisfaction, momentarily inexplicable. Then cold reason took the vision and put it in a frame of cruel and subtle realism. For the first time since the explosion, Sam's old smile, faint and enigmatic, touched his lips. Without moving, he watched Oldham walk away from the cave, carrying Martin's body down to where the horses were hitched below the creek.

Without hurry, the sheriff roped the corpse to one of the saddles, then walked to the Angels' hidden corral and turned all the mounts there out to the range. Still moving leisurely, he went back to the creek, stepped up to his saddle and, leading Martin's horse, rode away toward Mesa Grande.

Now that he knew he could not unseal the cave, Sam left without a backward glance. He remembered that on the morrow, Pablo Mendoza, Miguel's nephew, would be riding up the old, unused east trail to visit his uncle and bring him weekly news of his family. With this in mind, Sam walked down to the old trail and camped. He lit no fire and after dark denied himself the solace of a smoke, so alert was he against the possible return of Oldham.

Night, black and melancholy, pressed down upon the Trinities and small, varied noises blended in a familiar nocturnal symphony. There was in Sam a heavy, bone-deep weariness, yet thoughts tugged relentlessly at him, denying him sleep and sleep's merciful amnesty. This day and its tragedy blended itself into and became a part of memories which lay, dark-shadowed, in his mind, freshening and adding to all his old, accumulated bitterness.

When morning came, he went up to the pool back of Layton's ancient, deserted cabin and filled his canteen, then returned to the pinon thicket where he had spent the night. Patiently he waited, without food or coffee, while day advanced its brassy glare and heat. From this distance he saw three buckboards come to the creek shortly before noon. Men carrying litters and digging tools left the buckboards and went up to the cave.

It was past mid-afternoon when the men returned to the creek, the litter-bearers' backs bent against the increased weight of those litters.

All this Sam watched, his features set and inexpressive. After dust of the departing buckboards was a faint yellow cloud far toward Mesa Grande, he made and lighted a cigarette, hungrily drawing the smoke into his lungs.

Just before dusk, Pablo Mendoza rode up the trail on his scrawny pony. He paused now and then to give his shrill, identifying whistle. Sam stepped out in the open and Pablo, grinning, turned his horse and rode to the thicket.

"Miguel's gone away," Sam told him.

"There's been a little trouble. I've got an important job for you, Pablo, but you must not say a word about it to anybody, no matter what you hear in Mesa Grande or anywhere else."

The boy's thin shoulders lifted. "I, Pablo Mendoza, am one to be trusted, señor. I will be silent as the desert."

Sam switched to Spanish, safe-guarding his instructions against any misunderstanding.

"I want you to go into town once a week, as is your custom, and listen well to all that goes on. Remember everything said about Sheriff Hutch Oldham—*every word.* And on the night after going to town, ride up here and tell me what you've seen and heard. You will also tell your mother to send me food, coffee and tobacco; gold will be paid to her later for these things."

Pablo said, "I will go and watch and listen. Every Friday night I will meet you here."

He had brought tortillas and an earthern pot of frijoles and smoking tobacco for Miguel. These he now gave to Sam.

"You'll hear stories," Sam warned the boy, "about your uncle and all the other Dark Angels being dead. They will even say that I have been killed. Don't deny it, don't say anything—let it be as if you had not heard."

Pablo shrugged. "I will pretend that I do not understand the English. It is always easy that way." He regarded Sam hesitantly and quizzically. "But my Uncle Miguel, is he—is he dead, señor?"

"Yes," Sam said gently. "But we must betray nothing—neither our sorrow nor our anger—if the man who killed him is to pay for his death."

To Pablo, his Uncle Miguel had been a beloved and heroic figure. He clamped his jaws tightly and held his breath against unmanly weeping, but tears forced up to his eyes and slowly overflowed in parallel streaks down his dusty face. He swallowed with difficulty and for a while did not trust himself to speak.

Finally he said, "By The Holy Virgin, in this you can trust me, Señor Sam," then wheeled his horse and rode away.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Trail to Mesa Grande

FROM this pact there grew a pattern of days and weeks, stretching on into a second month: a boy impelled by hurt and hatred, riding out each week to where a man waited and coldly calculated the increasing value of his vengeance.

Pablo's reports were brief, as were his visits, for there was little other talk between these two who met surreptitiously in the pinon thicket.

At first: "The town, she is full with talk of how Sheriff Oldham tricked the Angels. Men come by the train to look at—at the bodies. Some they can recognize, some they cannot, so bad was the blast and the burns. They could not be sure about you, señor, or the men called Hess and Wesson."

Later: "The sheriff, he get his reward money—much gold, it is said. He is long at the Palace, drinking with his friends. There was much laughter."

And the next visit: "Sheriff Oldham is having built a house, a very big house. It is said he is to marry. He has bought from Señor Luke Steel a fine black horse and what is called a buggy. In it I saw him riding with the señorita. She was dressed in white—Señor Oldham seemed much happy."

Reports after that mentioned rapid progress in the building of Hutch Oldham's house, for he had money to hire many workmen. In the middle of the second month Pablo brought news that the house was completed.

"On the day after tomorrow," the boy added, "the sheriff is to marry the señorita who sometimes rides in his buggy. She is the daughter of the rich Señor Lawrence, who owns the mill and the big store. Tomorrow night the sheriff has invited all his friends to the Palace for a—for some kind of a party. After that—"

"But echoes of the passing bell," Sam interposed, memory of Doc's grim poem strong in his mind.

Pacho stared. "But I do not understand."

"Never mind," Sam told him. "Tomorrow afternoon you will come and bring another horse. Say to your mother that I will eat the evening meal at her house."

When the next day had passed and twilight gathered its first shadows, Sam sat at the table in the house of Louisa Mendoza.

Pablo's mother was a tall and stately woman, still and composed, her silences holding back many of the things that were in her mind. As Sam sat across the table from her, he could see in her dark hair streaks of premature gray. Otherwise the years had been kind to her.

Sam ate venison and tortillas, washing these down with coffee; Louisa Mendoza touched the tip of her corn-husk cigarette to the lighted candle, then sat there, smoking and watching Sam eat.

Louisa had both an intuitive and experienced wisdom of such men as Sam and she felt sharp regret at what she saw back of his mild, abstract manner. She also knew the futility of the effort she felt constrained to make, but with a gesture she sent Pablo from the room and set about the task.

"You think of Hutch Oldham," she said, looking at the tip of her cigarette, "and you

forget Sam Stockton. You do not see that you are hunted no more, that the old reward posters are now torn down because you are considered dead. You give no thought to going away and being another man, in name and in ways. One *might* find a new and better life. It would be foolish not to try."

Sam said, "What?" and looked at her.

She met his gaze blandly, blowing a drift of smoke across the table so gently that the candle flame barely stirred.

This brief pause, then she went on talking, her voice soft and persuasive, "You hold with the code that violence must be met with violence, but vengeance proves nothing except that you want to be God and deal out punishment in your own way. My father and Pepe, who was my husband, threw away their lives rather than to break that code. Miguel, my brother, went to the rimrocks and finally died in that cave for the same reason.

"Listen well, my friend: our days are made up of tears and laughter, love and hatred, pleasure and sorrow, and only a very great fool allows an excess of any one of these to possess him and thus destroy for him all the others."

She paused and Sam pushed back his chair, busying himself with tobacco and papers and saying nothing at all.

"Ah," she observed unhappily, "you do not listen to me, for you are convinced it is better that a man do what he thinks he must do, and die for it, than to let the knowledge he failed to do it kill him little by little."

The clearness of her perceptions startled Sam, yet nothing of this showed in the strict, inexpressive set of his features. He got up and emptied his money pouch on the table.

Louisa pushed the gold back to him. "Because I am your friend—because as a girl I was so very much in love with you—think well between here and town of what I have said to you. If you come to your senses, the horse is yours." A strong, yet paradoxical hesitancy altered faintly the tone of her voice. "As you know, I have money and considerable property. Should you decide to ride on to some other place I might, if asked, come there too." She lifted her fine shoulders and abruptly her words took on a quick, brittle quality. "If not, tie up the reins and turn the horse free—*it*, at least, will have the sense to come home."

Sam put out his hand and touched her. He smiled at her, said, *"Buenos noches,* Louisa—and thank you." He picked up the candle, lighted his cigarette and left the house without showing her any further attention.

PABLO was waiting outside. After Sam had stepped up to his saddle, the boy said, "When you have—after you've finished in Mesa Grande, will you go back to the Trinities? Shall I come tomorrow with food and coffee?"

"No," Sam told him. "No, not tomorrow."

Riding toward Mesa Grande, he forced himself to consider what Louisa had said, and how it would be if he moved on to San Francisco, or went East, or down to the little Texas town he had as a boy known as home. But all he could see were countless nights when there would follow him into the darkness of some room a vision of Hutch Oldham's face and the sound of his voice.

At the head of Mesa Grande's one long street, Sam dismounted and unbridled the horse. He took out his money pouch and tied it and the bridle to the saddle horn, then turned the horse and sent it away with a slap on the flank.

A full moon rode high in the sky and its light lay on Mesa Grande white as silver. A small wind moved through the night and there was a scent of distant sage and wildrose. In the town, buildings cast their shadows blackly, these relieved here and there by saffron squares of lamp-lit windows.

Sam gave all this a brief, exact attention then walked down the middle of the street. He moved unhurriedly, his senses attuned to the sounds and shapes of the night, for he was known to many citizens of this town and he realized that recognition might come at any moment.

He passed the blacksmith shop, hearing the low murmurs and soft laughter of a Mexican boy and girl loitering in the shadows there. At Pogue's Restaurant men were on the porch, talking and smoking, and light from the restaurant windows lay in a broad yellow shine across the street. Sam moved on through this, showing no interest in the men on the porch and receiving none from them. A rider pulled away from the hitchrack at Brandon's Hotel and Sam veered aside to make way for the horse, thereafter angling across from Wright's Harness Shop to the front of the Palace.

A priest came slowly past, walking toward the mission at the street's yonder end. He was an old man, with a genuine knowledge of humanity and its ways, and he saw something about Stockton that impelled him to stop and stand by one of the Palace windows.

In the short distance which now separated Sam from the Palace entrance lay his last chance to use the wisdom of Louiza Mendoza's advice. Yet there had built up in him a purpose impervious to reason or discretion, relentless beyond hesitancy or indecision. Consequently there was no break in his even stride and there was in his mind only the voice of Camita, whispering to him, *"Nothing shall ever separate us. My heart beats*

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against your heart; when one stops, the other shall stop also. Nothing can change that, Sam—nothing."

The batwing doors flapped shut behind him. The big saloon's bright lights were softened with a blue haze of tobacco smoke. A piano tinkled out a lively tune; there was an undertone of talk and an occasional overtone of loud laughter. Men were at the bar and at the poker tables.

In the former group was Hutch Oldham. He had his left elbow on the bar top and there was a fat, black cigar between his fingers. He held a glass of whiskey in his other hand and lamplight gave this a fine, rich coloring.

Prosperity had put its unmistakable stamp upon the sheriff. He wore black broadcloth and there was a heavy watch-chain of gold across his vest front. His boots were polished, his cheeks cleanly shaven. The men around him were looking up to him and seeking his friendship; this was his party and his night and he was enjoying it.

Seeing Oldham like that brought again to Sam's mind Tom Williams' deduction: "The more a man has, the worse he hates to die and leave it," and he had the sardonic satisfaction of believing the long, bitter days of waiting had been well invested.

For a full minute his entering the Palace went unnoticed. Talk went on and the music went on. Smoke from the tip of Oldham's cigar rose in a thin blue spiral. Then a man said, *"My God!"* the urgency of his tone jerking the room to a quick attention.

Talk stopped instantly, as if all those present were synchronized to a single accord. The music ended on a weak, discordant note. The bartender was reaching back for a bottle and his hand stayed like that, arrested in mid-air. In all the room there was no sound and no movement except the steady tick of the big wall-clock and the slow, measured swing of its pendulum.

INCREDULOUS amazement changed Hutch Oldham's every feature. His lips moved loosely, but no sound came from them. Color drained from his cheeks. The glass dropped from his hand and made a soft thud against the sawdust floor. The pressure of his fingers broke the black cigar and spilled its pieces on the bar top. The disbelief in his eyes slowly gave way to fear.

Sam ran one appraising glance over the room, thereafter regarding Oldham with complete absorption.

He said evenly, "I've finally counted out your part of the loot, Hutch, and I've come to give it to you."

The sound of Sam's voice cleared from

Oldham's mind the last hope of unreality. He fought for self-control with a visible, disciplined effort.

"Don't be a fool," he said hoarsely. "I am a peace officer. I have a right—it was my sworn duty—to get those outlaws any way I could. It's all over now, there ain't nothing you can do about it. If you start something, there ain't a chance of you getting away alive. There's two dozen guns in this room in holsters of my friends—and the Dark Angels ain't here now to back you up."

"You miss the point," Sam told himself wordlessly, showing to Oldham and the others only a stony, silent alertness. "I didn't come here to get away. I could have caught you stony off by yourself and killed you or I could have ridden away with Louisa."

He stood there, watching the sheriff's mounting panic with cold amusement.

"And the Angels," Sam's thoughts went on, "*are* here. Somewhere up above or down below—somewhere out in the night—they are watching and perhaps laughing a little. Maybe Mario is playing his violin and Camita is singing some small, gay song in Spanish." His thoughts paused and his eyes began growing brighter and brighter. "Pretty soon you'll know, Hutch, what they're doing."

These thoughts surged against the edges of Sam's mind, but the center held to a meticulous, unwavering watchfulness. The pressure of this turned Oldham craven.

"You *can't*, Sam," he begged. "*You mustn't.* Listen, I'm going to be married tomorrow; I have the house built and—"

Sam spoke aloud now. He said softly, "I know," and stood there looking at Oldham, the brightness in his eyes increasing.

The apathy of the room broke against the strain of this deliberate delay. The sheriff moved and threw a swift, appealing glance at his friends. Simultaneously he and two men near the bar slapped at their holsters.

Oldham's revolver was not clear of leather when Sam's first bullet hit him and slammed him back against the bar. In the split second he hung like that, Sam fired a second deliberate, coolly-aimed shot and this bullet made an ugly blue hole in the center of Oldham's temple, and Oldham was dead before his body slipped down to the floor.

Then came the inevitable fusillade, filling the Palace with the wicked roll of many guns.

And the priest, who had stood by the window and sadly watched all this, said solemnly, "Purpose and accomplishment. He who lived by the sword has now died by the sword." Then he crossed himself and walked on toward the mission at the far end of the street.

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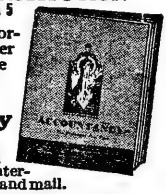

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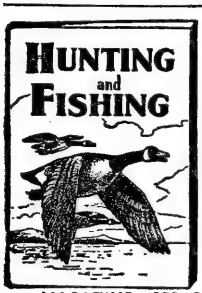

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(Continued from page 6)

boys gigging their wiry little ponies up the slant. Stolid Navaho women with their babies, their beautiful Pendleton shawls and heavy silver adornments. Bevies of attractive Hopi girls in reds and yellows, silks and nylons, modishly booted and turquoise-jeweled, the whirligig headdress of their grandmothers abandoned for the more prosaic permanent wave. Toothless Hopi crones, seemingly a little bewildered by the modern motif of a parade that has passed them and their generation.

We drink a Coke at the store, pass the time of day with Haile Sekakuku, brother of the priest, then toil up the trail, along which old men sit in the sun and smile at the shortness of our breath and murmur sympathetically about the steepness of the climb.

The only approach to the upper plaza is by ladder to the rooftops of the houses which completely surround it. It's a good, strong ladder and it imparts a confidence that does not desert us as we cross hard-packed earthen roofs ably supported by hewn timbers hauled in from far distant mountains. Each flat roof is bordered by sand rock copings, already lined on the inside by groups of chattering spectators who munch the Hopi version of hot dogs and wash each bite down with 7-Up —a symbol of modernism which has invaded this ancient place that was old, very, very old when Christopher Columbus was born.

We find a place and crowd in and turn our interest down into the plaza, where lazy dogs sleep and a line of watchers encircles the bedrock floor of the courtyard. The roofs are jammed until one wonders why they do not collapse. Never were colors more gay, or spirits more blithe. We consult the time. Ten minutes to wait. A Hopi policeman, hung with six-shooter, handcuffs and billy, stages a well-meant but futile attack upon the snoring canines. They slink away and when he retreats, creep back to their favorite places in the sun.

Now it is 5:10 and the afternoon sun is hanging low. The policeman's whistle shrills and a hush falls over the gathering. The hissing of the antelope skin rattles seeps into the plaza and down the lane leading to the kiva come the antelope dancers, painted and feather-bedecked, circling the plaza with no other sound than the faint tread of their moccasins and the hiss of their rattles. Their function is to rouse the snakes which are drowsing in an underground pit over which has been reared a tepee of cottonwood branches. Three times they circle the court, pausing in each round to each stomp heavily on the board roof of the pit to waken the snakes. Then they line up before the pit and the chant of the snake priests is heard.

Here they come, swinging down the lane, faces blackened, bare torsos bedaubed with red, white and black paint, their red head feathers waving, moccasins stomping the rhythm of their weird, moaning chant, their

eagle-plume wands waving to the tempo of the dirge. Marching in pairs, an arm flung about their partner's shoulders, tortoise shells click at their knees. Three complete circles, stepping around the sleeping dogs, then they pause, lining up to face the waiting antelope dancers. Our friend Joe Sekakuku leading, his usual genial smile replaced with an exalted look of dead seriousness. Nine days and nine nights he has been training his priests and purifying the reptiles. Colorfully garbed women march behind them, sprinkling holy corn pollen.

The beat of the wands slows. The chant ebbs and flows. The keeper of the snakes is brought forth and ushered into the snake pit. The snakes are handed out, one to each couple, and the march around the square is resumed, each snake handler holding a reptile in his mouth while his partner maintains the chanting. Each time the pit is passed, another snake is passed out, until each priest has several. The reptiles are loosed from time to time and the crowd shrinks back as they wriggle toward the houses. Priests herd them back toward the center with light brushings of the feather wands. Rattlers, side-winders, bullsnakes, red and blue racers. The chanting rises and falls. The crowd is silent and awed before a ceremony repeated a thousand times in each pueblo throughout the centuries. It seems like it has been going on for hours but the watch shows exactly twenty-three minutes when the chant falls away to silence, the priests catch up the snakes and race from the enclosure.

A sigh runs through the crowd and there is an instant movement to the outer parapet which overlooks the whole of Hopiland. Now we see the priests racing across the mesas with their scaly charges, hurrying away to secret places beyond the ken of human eyes, there to release the snakes at cardinal points of the compass. The reptiles have heard. The nine-day ceremony has not been in vain. The snakes will carry the message of urgency to the rain gods, who will not deny their pious subjects. The clouds will gather. Lightning will flash and in the thunder the Hopi will hear the promise of the gods. The rain will fall plentifully and there will be a bountiful harvest. Already great thunderheads are rising along the far horizons, touched with the red and gold and orange tints of sunsets. And one blinks as distant lightning outdoes the brilliance of the setting sun.

It is a long way home, how long we cannot even guess. There is need of hurry. We drop to the car and speed back as we have come. Beyond Keam's Canyon we are flagged down by returning motorists. A flood has swept down Jeddito Wash, carrying the bridge away. There is no returning by Ganado. We wheel about, retrace our tracks to the junction near Polacca. If we can't go by Ganado, we'll take the longer route via Joseph City. But, alas, the Jeddito ford is running four feet deep. Faced by the uneasy promise of a rainy night in Hopiland, we speed west to

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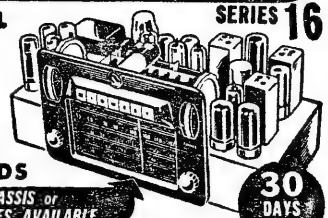

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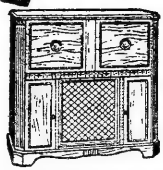

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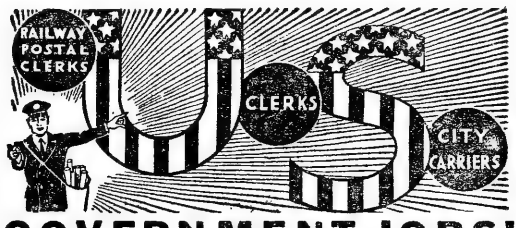

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Next year there will be other dances, at other pueblos. And the year after that. And the countless years that stretch ahead. We can't see them all but we'll see the next one, God willing, on a rocky parapet at Oraibi, maybe, or Shitchumovi, or Moencopi, or Walpi . . . what matter? It's a date.

Much obliged, Harry. Obliged, too, for the colorful frontier yarn, from your typewriter, that appears elsewhere in this issue. Hope we'll hear from you soon again.

HONOR AMONG HORSE THIEVES

IN THE days when Southern California was still untamed wilderness, a desert character known as Frank Fox was accused of horse stealing and was subsequently shot and killed by an officer of the law. His body was buried at the site of the old Carrizo stage station and a roughly-chiseled tombstone was erected to mark the spot.

Some years later the stone disappeared, presumably being taken for its souvenir value. It was replaced with another stone. This, too, was stolen. In 1943 there one day appeared on the grave a near-replica of the original marker. In a tobacco can wedged between the rocks covering the grave, was a note: "This stone was erected through the courtesy of one horse thief to another."

* * *

Heavy traffic, combined with a long period of unbroken rainfall, resulted in certain San Francisco streets becoming impassable during the historic winter of 1849. Seeking a solution for the nearly bottomless mud which formed a virtual quagmire, San Francisco citizens began casting about for paving material.

Lumber was selling at a dollar a foot and paving stone was not to be had at any price. Thus it was that some of the world's strangest and most costly sidewalks came into being. One end of one street was surfaced with hundred-pound sacks of Chilean flour; these graduated into a row of iron cookstoves, and finally ended on wooden tobacco boxes. The thoroughfare reached its climax where a muck-filled gutter was bridged by a grand piano brought around Cape Horn!

—Nell Murbarger

THE KID PAYS HIS KEEP

By

RUEL McDANIEL

"SORRY, Kid, but you got to take the next freight wagon back to Santone. Chihuahua City's too tough for a younker like you." The heavy-set man was firm but sympathy showed in his eyes. "In a couple of years, after you get some meat on them bones and a little experience under your belt, maybe you can come back."

The Kid was only fifteen, and his small body made him look younger. His eyes pleaded with his brother.

"But, Sam," he pleaded, "I'm not soft. Didn't I beat hell out of that hombre in New Orleans when he pulled a crooked deck on me? I want to stay here in Chihuahua with you and Mr. Sanford. I could keep on helping you in the store."

"Sorry, Kid. The freighter leaves at six in the mornin'. You'll be on it. I can't take the responsibility."

A more mature boy would have understood. Chihuahua City was the western terminus of the San Antonio-Chihuahua Trail. It was where men from such towns as San Antonio and El Paso went when the monotony of too few killings palled on them—or when expediency dictated they high-tail it to other climes.

The few Americans who pitched camp in Chihuahua City were tough, but they were no tougher than the gang of native outlaws who holed in among the nearby hills and swooped down on the village at will, to pillage and kill. Gringos were their special dish. Chihuahua City was tough.

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It was reasonable and logical that Big Sam wanted to get his kid brother out of there while the Kid was all in one piece. . . .

That afternoon Sam and his partner, Sanford, left the Kid in charge of the combination store and saloon while they inspected a herd of cattle in the hills.

Diablo Sanchez headed a wild bunch of natives who rustled cattle and robbed freighters in the Chihuahua City country, and he was more than slightly inebriated.

Four customers lounged at the bar in their unhurried way as Diablo roared into the place, swinging a machete. He cursed and swung his machete. "Thees day I kill somebody—maybe a gringo, I hope!" He lunged in the direction of one patron, who left the place pronto.

"I'm toughes' caballero in Chihuahua. In all Mexico!" He counted off with his fingers some of his recent killings. He slashed toward another bar patron. After that, the place emptied.

Almost emptied, that is. The Kid was still there. "That's 'nough, hombre," the Kid said slowly.

The outlaw glowered and blinked. He spat toward the Kid. He clutched his machete more firmly and suddenly, blade upraised, moved forward.

The boy didn't move. He did not even bat an eyelash. "You better get outer here," he said.

Diablo Sanchez plunged on. The Kid's hand slid to his hip. The outlaw ignored the move. With the glittering blade ready to strike, he plunged at the boy.

With a final word of warning, the Kid's hand snapped up. The muzzle of the old single-action pistol rose. The gun roared once.

A crimson circle burst directly between the outlaw's eyes. An expression of amazement came over the man's face. A gurgle in his throat signaled his plunge forward on the dirt floor.

The Kid calmly blew the smoke from his gun, reloaded, and as calmly shoved the weapon back into its holster.

Gradually the cowed townspeople emerged from behind locked doors and drawn blinds and some drifted back to the store. They looked at the sprawled corpse of Diablo and gazed at the gangling gringo in amazement.

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THE KID PAYS HIS KEEP

It was a rare killing, even in Chihuahua City. The news spread.

It spread to the devious haunts of Diablo's followers and sundry other gunmen who nurtured a natural hate of all gringos, large or small. The news reached Sam and his partner, too, and they hurried back to town.

The rumblings of a few of the dead killer's *compadrilles* quickly aroused a mob. Sam, his partner and the Kid were trapped inside the saloon. Ammunition was low.

"You slip through the cellar door," Sam whispered to the boy. "Then hightail it to Señora Maria's shack. We'll meet you there!"

A smile was on the Kid's lips. "You mean, run away from my own fight? Much obliged, but I won't do that." He turned his eyes back to the hole in the adobe wall to watch the mob.

The mob ran amuck. They declared death for every gringo in Chihuahua City. Under the cover of darkness, their ammunition exhausted, Sam, Sanford and the Kid escaped through the cellar door.

They obtained horses and sped out of town. "We'll push on to Jesus Maria, in Sonora," Sam suggested. "We can wait till things blow over and come back—or head on for California."

"What about my freight wagon ride back to Santone in the morning?" the Kid asked.

Sam grinned slyly. "Guess you'll pay your keep with our bunch," he said.

And thus Roy Bean, later the colorful "Law West of the Pecos," killed his first man.

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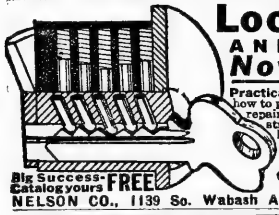

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(Continued from page 31)

money was no longer your responsibility," the major bellowed. "So you had no excuse at all!"

"It was government money, sir."

The major sighed like a steam engine spurting sorrow and a vague pity. "You were hit," he said, eyeing the stained and torn tunic where the bullet Kane had not felt during the heat of the fight had raked his ribs. "Unfit for duty."

"No, sir," Kane said indignantly.

The major eyed him.

"Sergeant," he said, "I ought to bust you for this. By God, I ought to bust you and put you in the hoosegow for this. You've disobeyed orders. You've risked the lives of your men for nothing. You—you've subjected government property to injury by actions not in accordance with regulation. You're confined to the Post for a month, Sergeant—and you will pay for that tunic. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was anybody else hurt?"

"Yes, sir. Private Kenelly received a wound in the thigh."

The major's eye glinted. "Then you'll pay for *his* trousers."

"Private Kenelly also had the shoulder of his tunic torn by a bullet, sir."

The major's face purpled. "That will be all, Sergeant," he snarled. "Report to the infirmary at once."

"Yes, sir."

Kane saluted stiffly and went out, feeling the fury in him flaming on his neck.

Outside, the music stopped him. It was Retreat and this was the *Star Spangled Banner.* He slapped his heels together and swung his hand stiffly to the salute.

The guard stood at present arms and he eyed them with habitual intentness, seeing that Kretsky, as usual, had pulled the butt of his carbine in too far.

The shadows were long and blue and harsh over the parade ground. There were no cottonwoods, no willows, no flowers, only the harsh outlines of the buildings and the far, violent, flaming colors of the sunset.

Sergeant Kane pulled a long slow breath. The heat and gun-noise of that dusty street came back to him—the harsh disorder and indiscipline of the civilian world, briefly, nearly unreal. And here was order and discipline, clarity, and the day's duty done.

And abruptly, Kane, Sergeant, United States Cavalry, was content. His thoughts softened even in regard to the major, so that some of the tougher minded of the mule-drivers might have listened without too revealing a blush.

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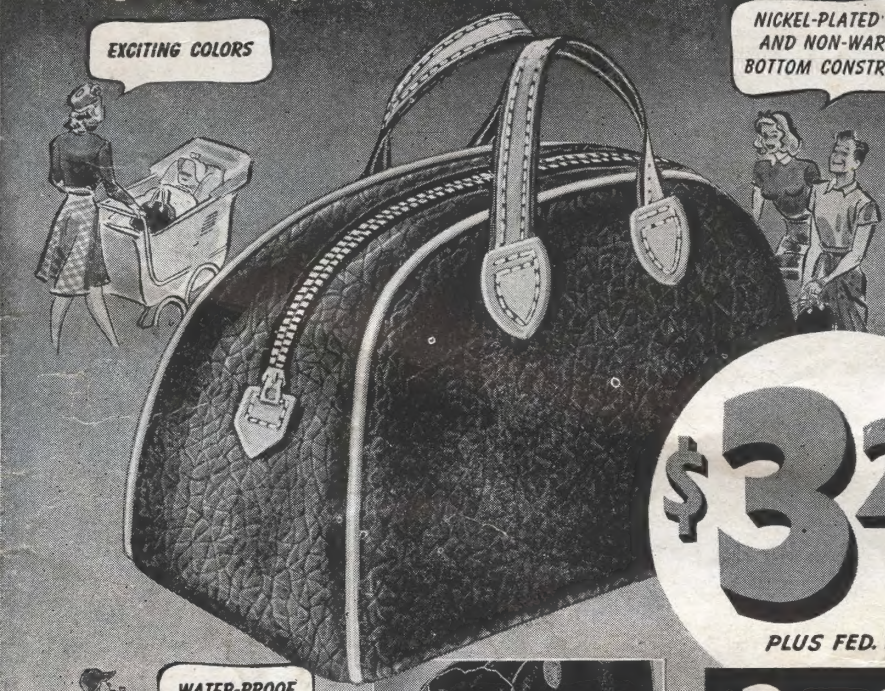

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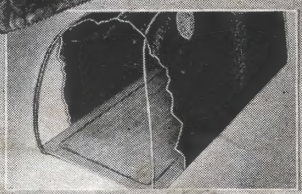

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